Internally Displaced: Transnationally Adopted Asian Women in the United States

By

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Abstract

This research examines the theoretical and political considerations of transnationally adopted Asian women's subjectivities situated within a contemporary U.S. context. Utilizing oral history, I discuss how adopted women's histories of loss, in addition to lost histories, are constructed through processes of immigration, racialization, and assimilation across the public domain and the private realm of family and intimacy. I deploy David Eng and Shinhee Han's theoretical framework of racial melancholia to explicate the psycho-social disposition of transnationally adopted Asian women through a de-pathologized politics of loss to contend with the dominant moralizing discourse of Asian transnational adoption. This research explores the historical emergence of this gendered pattern of Asian migration through the narrative accounts of adopted Asian women who once migrated to the United States as baby girls. Engaging with salience of adopted Asian baby girls and desire for Asian women within dominant culture, this work explores the meaning making process of race, gender, and sexuality for transnationally adopted Asian women through the socio-historical conditions of loss against the present U.S. "post-racial" moment.

For those I have never known.

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Before applying to graduate school, I knew I wanted to write about Asian transnational adoption—which at times felt more like an urgency to understand how I migrated to the United States. I offer, first and foremost, my warmest thanks to the adopted Asian women who contributed to this research and helped me understand how our histories of migration are intertwined amidst the silos adoptees often find themselves in. I am incredibly indebted to the friendship and generosity that filled the spaces we once shared.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis: 27,444 words

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Signed Lily Stewart

A Note on Terminology

I acknowledge the term *adoptee* is considered politically inappropriate by some. On the one hand, it is understood to perpetuate the infantilization of adopted people as perineal children. That is, adopted people are largely treated and thought of as if they are always suffering or grieving children wherein their adoption histories are isolated into a single moment of relinquishment. It is also possible that the suffix -ee indicates a recipient of an action, often in opposition to an agent. In this case, adoptee can be viewed to further exacerbate the infantilizing tendencies of people who are adopted that remove a sense of agency. *Adopted person* or *adopted Korean/Chinese/etc.* is preferred terminology for some. I use *adoptee* throughout this research partly for concision in the writing process.

Birth parent, biological parent, and *real parent* are conventional terms that are often deployed in dominant culture and among adoptee communities. For some, these terms reify dominant ideologies of biogeneticism, ideas of blood-line kinship, and heteronormative structures of family that naturalize genealogical relations to notions of ethnic, racial, or national belonging.[1] Let me emphasize the usage of these terms carry shifting and distinct meanings for the positionality of whom deploys them, the context, and specific purpose in which they are used. Today, transnational adoptees are often persecuted for expressing their losses of first families framed as "backwards" race thinking insofar as transnational adoption is venerated as an act that transcends biology. "Love, not biology" is a popular sentiment among advocates of transnational adoption and are sustained in dominant culture that helps to buttress the U.S. nation-state through a narrative of racial progress and freedom.[2] Crucially,

[1] See Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Liisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzani* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
[2] See William Mcgum, "Love, Not Biology: A Chinese-American Mother's Day," New York Post, May 9 2013, https://nypost.com/2014/05/09/love-not-biology-a-chinese-american-mothers-day/.

for adoptees who deploy these conventional terms, such usage does not negate what or who they have lost but reflects ideas of self that are prescribed by dominant culture. I have opted to use the terms *first parent/family* and *second parent/family* to underline the chronology of adoptees' relations who are placed across at least two families despite the legal eradication of familial ties to their first families. This usage opens up the affective relationships to both families that also brings attention to the subsequence of second families that are preconditioned by the former, thus, using time as a frame to mark adoptees' life histories. These terms are also racialized that I also refer to as *Asian parent/family* and *white adoptive parent/family*. I have used *birth name* and *birth place* sparingly for simplification purposes. Additionally, it is also possible *colorblindness* mobilizes ableist language to describe the refusal to acknowledge race that in turn inadequately acknowledges the subordination of dis/abled communities.[3] I do not deny this—my use of this term reflects my personal decision of the writing process.

[3] See Subini Annamma, Darrell Jackson, and Deb Morrison, "Conceptualizing Color-Evasiveness: Using Dis/ability Critical Race Theory to Expand a Color-Blind Racial Ideology in Education and Society," *Race ethnicity and education* 20, no. 2 (2017): 147-162.

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Introduction

The United States remains the top "receiving" country for internationally adopted children worldwide with Asian children constitutive of the most adopted bodies, notably by white U.S. citizen-subjects.[4] International adoption is commonly interchanged with overseas or intercountry adoption. However, I deploy the term transnational adoption to accentuate the globally circulated channels of child migration which entail ongoing and multilateral currents of children that instigate "a range of subsequent mobilities—of information, people, goods, and services—from and to the so-called sending and receiving nations that are shaped by and shape new globalizing trends and transnational processes."[5] Further, my use of transnational refers to adoptions that are transracial as the salient practice of white U.S. subjects who adopt children from Asia. While not all transnational adoptions are transracial, or vice versa, this research is limited to adopted Asian women, from East and Southeast Asia, who were once placed into white adoptive families in the United States.

This research inquires into the specific transnational adoptee subjectivity of Asian women with particular attention to the discursive formation of racialized sexuality situated within a contemporary U.S. context. Powerful ideations of an excessive supply of destitute infants and children stricken by poverty and war consolidate celebratory narratives of transcendent love and tolerant multiculturalism. Nonetheless, such racialized constructions are simultaneously gendered wherein the popularized figure of the Asian girl has become emblematic of transnational adoption in the United States today. I am primarily interested in how structures of the white middle-class adoptive family and heteronormativity construct and manage the racially sexualized difference of transnationally adopted Asian women in the

[4] Catherine Choy, *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 2.
[5] Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 10.

private realm. This work utilizes oral histories transnationally adopted Asian women to consider the theoretical and political implications of transnational adoption as an interpellative force. I am thus concerned with how transnational adoption, as a form of immigration, produces racial, gender, and sexual subjects through the private sphere. This research asks: What constitutes Asian transnationally adopted women subjectivity? How might they be configured through dominant racial paradigms of Asian, American, and Asian American? To what extent does their subjectivation in the white adoptive family underline their succeeding intimate relations throughout their life?

Contemporary Asian Transnational Adoption: Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and China

Although the emergence of contemporary transnational adoption from Asia is often associated with Korea through the immediate aftermath of the Korean War, children from Japan were the first transracial intercountry adoptions adopted by U.S. servicemen, as well as "foreigners" in Japan and abroad, conceived during the U.S. occupation of postwar Japan (1945-1952).[6] Cultural anthropologist Eleana Kim suggests this lesser known history of Asian transnational adoption can be understood in terms of Japan's "ambivalent status as a former adversary," as well as national anxieties of U.S. servicemen ''sleeping with the enemy."[7] Under a liberal, anti-racist, and anticommunist project, Pearl Buck's Welcome House, the first transracial adoption agency, facilitated the migration of Amerasian children to the United States.[8] Pearl Buck, a novelist and the first U.S. American woman to win both a Pulitzer Prize and Nobel Prize in Literature, wrote prolifically about China for U.S. audiences, perhaps most influenced by her upbringing in Zhenjiang, China due to her parents' work there as Christian

[6] Roger Goodman, *Children of the Japanese State: The Changing Role of Child Protection Institutions in Contemporary Japan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 148; emphasis added.
[7] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 46.
[8] Kim, 46. Amerasian refers to chidren fathered by U.S. servicemen and local Asian women.

missionaries. For Buck, U.S. citizens had the moral and patriotic duty to nurture Amerasian children, she denoted as "children without a country," from the plague of communism.[9]

During the U.S. occupation of Korea (1945-1948), sexual relations between local women and U.S. servicemen also ensued that led to an estimated one-thousand "mixed-blood" children in postwar Korea.[10] Yet, these children mostly surrounded the 38th parallel—near the U.S. military units—while those in orphanages and hospitals were primarily full Korean.[11] The U.S. media coverage of these children from 1954 onward would impel a significant interest among U.S. citizen-subjects interested in adopting these children who would go on to contact Korean consulates, the Korean government, the United Nations ambassador, and the South Korean president.[12] As the Korean government sought to quickly introduce adoption law to meet its immediate social welfare needs, by the end of the 1950s, a notable shift took place among the demographics of relinquished children. Kim describes a decrease in relinquished mixed-blood children coincided with a surge in relinquishment among the broader Korean population wherein Korean children became enlisted in an "aggressive modernization policy that leveraged poor Korean families and the lives of their children for national security and foreign policy goals."[13] In 1955, the highly publicized adoption of eight Korean children in by the Christian evangelicals that later founded Holt Adoption Agency (1956), invoked an explosive demand for Korean war orphans and would generate increasing competition among adoption agencies in Korea.[14] Today, Korea transnational adoption

[9] Kim, 46.
[10] Kim, 47.
[11] Kim, 47.
[12] Kim, 47.
[13] Kim, 72.
[14] "There is quite a bit of rivalry and competition among the different agencies, and it is not beyond agencies to bribe or pressure the mothers for the release of these children, and agencies including ISS [International Social Services] have to go to find the Korean-Caucasian children by visiting prostitute areas, as it is not a common practice for the mothers to approach the agencies for the release of their children.'' See SWHA, ''Korea: Reports and Visits to Korea 1956–,'' Box 35, Report on Korea, August 1966, 6.

constitutes the largest and longest program in the world uninterrupted for more than five decades.[15]

As adoptions from Korea increased during the 1970s, the mass "evacuation" of nearly three-thousand Vietnamese children in the final moments of the Vietnam War would take place in 1975, what is popularly known as "Operation Babylift." As North Vietnamese troops advanced towards Saigon-today's Hồ Chí Minh City, in early 1975, thousands inundated the city and U.S president Gerald Ford would announce that thousands of children who were awaiting the completion of adoption proceedings overseas would be granted exit visas through its co-facilitated efforts with South Vietnamese officials.[16] The days leading up to the fall of Saigon, on April 30th, 1975, would consist of a series of flights consisting predominantly of Vietnamese children, as well as Cambodian children, whose final destinations lie throughout the United States, Canada, West Germany, France, and other allied countries.[17] This highly publicized plan would strike further international media attention when a US Air Force Galaxy C-5A, at the time the largest aircraft in the world, carrying 243 children and 43 escorts, took off from Tan Son Nhut airport as the first scheduled flight of Operation Babylift and would crash minutes after its departure.[18] The collision into a paddy field just outside of Saigon, caused by a mechanical fault with the aircraft's door locks that led the rear hatch to blow out, brought about 138 fatalities, 78 of which were children and 38 Defense Attaché Office, Saigon personnel.[19] Despite its tragic beginning, airlifts under Operation Babylift, both U.S. government sponsored and private flights, would continue to facilitate the

[15] Kim, 24.
[16] Joshua Forkert, "Orphans of Vietnam: A History of Intercountry Adoption Policy and Practice in Australia, 1968-1975," Dissertation (South Australia: University of Adelaide, 2012), 154.
[17] The political conflict of the Vietnam War and the rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia resulted in widespread displacement throughout the region—many of which would migrate to neighboring countries such as South Vietnam.
[18] Forket, "Orphans of Vietnam," 177.
[19] United States Agency for International Development, *Operation Babylift: Report* (Washington DC: USAID, 1975), 1.

placement of Vietnamese and Cambodian children into mostly white adoptive families throughout the West until its final airlift on May 7th, 1975.[20] Operation Babylift has received great scrutiny concerning that many of the airlifted children were not orphans to begin with, the chaos of its expedited execution—understood to be evidenced by the initial plane crash, and the contemporaneous anti-Vietnam War movement. Concerns around the orphan status of transnationally adopted Vietnamese children has since pervaded throughout the decades and would eventually lead to the Vietnam's 2008 ban on adoptions with the United States over speculations of kidnapping. As of 2016, the ban has been lifted.

Perhaps, China's "one-child policy" is most closely imagined with the popularized figure of the adopted Asian girl and refers to a series of birth planning restrictions emerging in the early 1980s.[21] The "one-child policy" limits couples to a single child, yet in many areas this became a "one son/two children" policy that allowed parents to try for a son if their firstborn was a daughter.[22] Enforcement measures included steep fines for "overquota" children, mandatory sterilization, termination of employment, and the threat of forced abortion in the event of future pregnancies.[23] Under China's population policy, government "birth-workers" used "persuasion through 'thought work' and social pressure, the approved methods of obtaining compliance with what is still policy rather than law," where "coercive measures are made to look not only like persuasion…but even like nurturance."[24] Chinese transnational adoption would steadily increase from 1991 when the first adoption law was

[20] Forket, "Orphans of Vietnam," 178.
[21] Kay Johnson, "Chaobao: The Plight of Chinese Adoptive Parents in the Era of the One-Child Policy," in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption,* ed. by Toby Alice Volkman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 122.
[22] Toby Alice Volkman, "Embodying Chinese Culture Transnational Adoption in North America," in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 85-86.
[23] Volkman, 86, Kay Johnson, "Chaobao: The Plight of Chinese Adoptive Parents in the Era of the One-Child Policy," in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption,* ed. by Toby Alice Volkman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 129.
[24] Ann Anagnost, *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 131.

codified that catapulted from 115 adoptions to around 5,000 every year by the late 1990s.[25] With the turn of the century, China became the leading "sending" country of children to the United States and elsewhere in the word, amounting to 30,000 adopted Chinese children.[26]

Theoretical Framework

I draw from Chinese American literary scholar David Eng and Korean American psychotherapist Shinhee Han's theory of racial melancholia to consider the psycho-social dispositions of transnationally Asian adoptee women situated within a contemporary U.S. context.[27] Unlike typical Freudian psychoanalytic theory that casts melancholia as an individual and pathological formation which privileges the internal world over the material, racial melancholia is conceptualized as a "depathologized structure of feeling" to theorize the concomitant social and psychic process of everyday struggles with racialization, assimilation, and immigration primarily concerned with group identifications.[28] While Freud distinguishes melancholia from mourning by its inability to end, Eng and Han posit that racial melancholia places Asian Americans along a terrain of conflict, rather than damage, that elucidates a continuum between mourning and melancholia."[29] This framework examines registers of loss and depression as an intergenerational and intersubjective process that occurs between Asian born first-generation parents and their U.S. born second-generation children.[30] Eng and Han originally co-authored their article, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," in 2000 but came to realize this formulation was inadequate to explain the various psychic predicaments of Asian

[25] Volkman, 1, 81, 124.
[26] Volkman, 82.
[27] See David Eng and Shinhee Han, "Desegregating Love: Transnational Adoption, Racial Reparation, and Racial Transitional Objects," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 7, 2 (2006): 141- 172 for first version of racial melancholia for Asian transnational adoptees.
[28] Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), in David Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (New York: Duke University Press, 2019), 35.
[29] David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (New York: Duke University Press, 2010), 121.
[30] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 35, 48, 78.

transnational adoptees.[31] Since then, they have reconfigured racial melancholia specific to the psycho-social conflicts for Asian American transnational adoptees that delineates a mainly intrasubjective and internal process rather than an intergenerational and external disposition. Put otherwise, racial difference between the Asian transnational adoptee and the white adoptive family is central to the adoptee's struggles with racialization, assimilation, and immigration that are often suffered in isolation. Eng and Han explain a tremendous "affective cleaving" that occurs within the private space of the family:

> While transnational adoptees identify with their parents' whiteness, their parents do not necessarily identify with their children's Asianness. Such a failure of recognition threatens to redouble racial melancholia's effects, severing the adoptee from the intimacy of the family unit, emotionally segregating her, and obliging her to negotiate her significant losses in isolation and silence.[32]

Affectively severed from the families they have been placed into, Asian transnational adoptees' experiences of loss are often insufficiently recognized as loss to begin with. Nearly all of the adopted Asian women I interviewed for this work shared the significance of clinical therapy throughout their lives that have supported them in understanding their shifting feelings around adoption, race, gender, and sexuality. Experiences with depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, self-harm, and post-traumatic stress disorder spanned across many of the conversations entwined with their personal adoption histories and the lack of recognition around their struggles arising from immigration, racialization, and assimilation by their white adoptive families. Understanding racial melancholia for transnational adoptees as a largely intrasubjective process allows us to explore how the psycho-social conditions of transnational adoption organize a collective psychic condition that shapes larger communal group identities for

[31] David Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10, 4 (2000): 667–700.
[32] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship,* 151.

Asian transnational adoptees.[33] Eng and Han conjoin psychoanalytic theory and critical race studies that have remained largely independent from one another as intellectual sites of inquiry.[34] While psychoanalysis' privileging of sexuality in individuated frameworks of development often relegate race to the periphery, they argue critical race studies has yet to seriously consider insights of psychoanalytic theory in apprehending collective racial subjectivity and race relations as interwoven material and psychic phenomena.[35] Largely focused on the domestic history of constitutional law in the United States and black-white binary race relations, racial melancholia explores the new demographic trend of transnational adoptees among Asian Americans as the social and psychic structures that constitute the intertwinement of the individual and collective.[36]

Racial melancholia draws insights from psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's theory of object relations. For Klein, the notion of good and bad objects develops from the infant's first object attachment which she posits as the mother's breast.[37] Thus, the splitting and idealization of the breasts as good and bad objects, namely the good and bad breast, underwrites the infant's succeeding relations throughout its life.[38] Eng's development of Klein's theory refines the good and bad breast into good and bad racialized mothers—Asian birth mother and the white adoptive mother.[39] These processes of racial splitting and idealization function as defense strategies against the heightened loss of the first object relation—the Asian birth mother. For Klein, these mechanisms mark an oscillation between two positions constant throughout one's life she conceptualizes as the paranoid-schizoid

[33] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 35.
[34] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 5.
[35] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 5.
[36] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 7.
[37] Melanie Klein, "Weaning" in *Love, Guilt and Reparation, and Other Works, 1921-1945* (London: Hogarth Press, 1975), 290.
[38] Melanie Klein, "Mourning and Its Relation to Manic-Depressive States," in *Essential Papers on Object Loss*, edited by Rita V. Frankiel (New York University Press, 1994), 99.
[39] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 21.

position and depressive position. The former is marked through the combination of fear and rage that saturates the world with persecutory anxieties while the latter involves occupying an emotional state where one is not entirely consumed by anxiety. Thus, in the depressive position one can imagine the world as a nurturing place that underpins the possibility to internalize its goodness as a building block towards harmonious relations as a reparative process of love. Eng and Han denote these two positions as racialized where ambivalent relations with the Asian birth mother and white adoptive mother underlines transnational adoptees' "vexed identifications and affiliations with lost objects, places, and ideals of Asianness, as well as whiteness, [that] remain estranged and unresolved."[40]

In W.E.B. Du Bois', *The Souls of Black Folk,* he poses the question to African Americans, "How does it feel to be a problem?"[41] Comparative U.S. race scholars' revision of Dubois' inquiry have since asked Asian Americans, "How does it feel to be a solution?[42] This research attends to the racial politics of Asian Americans and Asian transnational adoptees that largely figure these racial subjects as "solutions," albeit in specifically distinct ways, to the U.S. nation-state. That is, both Asian Americans and adoptees are considered eccentric to the nation, and the latter to the white heteronormative middle-class family that this research discusses. Through racial melancholia, this framework explicates the political and theoretical implications of racializing Asian Americans as "solutions," or the pervasive model minority stereotype. Arising from Eng and Han's collective sorrow after a series of suicides by Asian American students and murder of Asian American law student by a former boyfriend at Colombia University, they were unsettled by the lack of acknowledgement by administrators, faculty, students, and a part of themselves, on the social and psychic violence and pain among

[40] David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (New York: Duke University Press, 2010), 116.
[41] See W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903).
[42] Eng, 41; See Vijay Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

Asian American communities. They came together to explore Freud's concept of melancholia to explore depression and suicide afflicting Asian American students; and the heavy sadness students encountered on daily basis arising from immigration, assimilation, and racialization.[43] Eng writes, "More often than not, racism against Asian Americans occurs without recognition and without provoking any serious outcry or protest."[44]

In terms of Asian transnational adoption, dominant discourse renders this practice as an absolute moral act of goodness that inadequately recognizes the psychic and social struggles Asian transnational adoptees endure across the domestic realm of family and the public sphere. Tending to the gendered patterns of Asian transnational adoption migration and Asian American subjectivity, this research aims to explore how transnationally adopted Asian women are constituted through processes of immigration, racialization, and assimilation indexed by a politics of loss through the intimate realm within the present "post-racial" moment. Engaging with the discursive production of racialized sexuality pertaining to the Asian female figure, this work centralizes how adopted Asian women's life histories inform and are informed across the private sphere of intimate relations—acknowledging the public and private divide are mutually constitutive rather than endorsing normative divisions between "the state and family, civil society and the home."[45]

[43] See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey et al., vol. 14 (London: Hogarth, 1957), 243-258. For studies that suggest higher levels of social isolation and depressive symptoms among Asian Americans in comparison to African American, Latinx, and white adolescents see Desiree Baolian Qin, "Doing Well vs. Feeling Well: Understanding Family Dynamics and the Psychological Adjustment of Chinese Immigrant Adolescents," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 37 (2008): 22–35. See also Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2015).
[44] Eng, *Racial Melancholia*, 2.
[45] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 43.

Method, Methodology, and Research Design

Historian Alessandro Portelli reminds us that "oral sources are *oral* sources."[46] That is, the task of listening to the "unspoken—potentially, but not necessarily, silenced—transcript of the interview."[47] While scholars are willing to admit the actual document is the recorded tape, almost all go on to work on the transcripts where only transcripts become published.[48] Thus, attending to the orality of oral sources, as the transcript turns aural objects into visual ones, is what makes oral history unlike written sources and a distinct field.[49] Oral history research is an entwinement of practice and theory—doing and interpreting—that make it exciting, controversial, and promising.[50] As a historical practice, its theoretical and political aspects must be considered. Portelli prefaces one of his studies by explaining how his oral history account attempts to:

> convey the sense of fluidity, of unfinishedness, of an inexhaustible work in progress, which is inherent to the fascination and frustration of oral history—floating as it does in time between the present and an ever-changing past, oscillating in the dialogue between the narrator and the interviewer, and melting and coalescing in the no-man's land from orality to writing and back.[51]

The narrative account of past events is an intersubjective experience whereby the researcher interacts and engages with the layers of meaning people ascribe to the past contained within their memories.[52] Memory, then lies at the core of oral history that evinces a process of remembering, not least because the fallibility of accuracy and bias of recalling past events is

[46] Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1998), 63.
[47] Nadia Jones-Gailani, "Towards an Affective Methodology: Interviewer, Translator, Participant" in *Transnational Identity and Memory Making in the Lives of Iraqi Women in the Diaspora* (University of Toronto Press, 2020), 61.
[48] Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 64.
[49] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1, 18.
[50] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 1.
[51] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi*, vii.
[52] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 18.

an active encounter with meaning making rather than "passive depository of facts."[53] Oral history imbues the potential to reimagine the past between researcher and narrator that is located within a shared moment.[54] The present intersubjective relationship molds narrative productions of memories that involves a continually shifting power relation as the construction of memory stories reflects the interchanging audience during the oral history session.[55] What is threaded across the session involves a three-way dialogue primarily between, but not limited to: "the respondent with [themselves], the interviewer and the respondent, and between the respondent and cultural discourses of the present and the past."[56]

I locate myself, as a transnationally adopted Chinese woman, across this research both as an insider and outsider within communities of transnationally adopted Asian women who reside in the United States today. Ruth Behar explains the "insertion of personal stories into what we have been taught to think of as the analysis of impersonal social facts" have long been a site of criticism in academic writing.[57] Thus, this research stands against positivist notions of objectivity, rationality, and distance that pose being "too personal" as the worst sin and sacrifice of academic vigor.[58] I am entirely sensitive to the immense power asymmetries regarding the politics of knowledge surrounding transnational adoption as historically produced by non-adopted researchers that have foregrounded, instilled, and fortified the dominant view of transnational adoption that remains potent today: *Adoption is a good thing. And it is a good thing for everyone.* My readings, interpretations, and findings are intricately embedded into this work as I am deeply implicated in the knowledge I disseminate through

[53] Abrams, 23, 78; Portelli, *The Death of Luigi*, 52.
[54] Abrams, 27.
[55] Abrams, 27, 59.
[56] Abrams, 59.
[57] Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 12.
[58] Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*, 13.

my efforts to re-suture the ruptured histories Asian transnational adoptees have been disallowed to mourn.

Oral history has long been regarded by feminist researchers as the means to recover the narratives of women that had been previously silenced in historical accounts and ameliorate the power imbalances in the interview.[59] Historian Nadia Jones-Gailani explains, "With the shift from social history to the 'cultural turn' in history, women's historians have attended to fostering new archives of oral sources through which women's lives could be 'read.'"[60] This work is my attempt towards developing an oral history feminist method by embedding myself in this research and through my relations with the narrators. Feminist research method, broadly conceived, has opposed any pretense at objectivity, alongside Black, subaltern, gay, and lesbian histories, that challenge the white, male, middle-class standpoint.[61] Thus, oral history's entwinement with subjectivity and intersubjectivity engage with the practical and theoretical considerations that has been most sustained by feminist approaches.[62]

Speaking about my personal adoption history has become increasingly debilitating emotional, psychological, and physical task. For my first twenty-one years, it has been unspeakable and not least unthinkable. As to maintain the vulnerable sensitivity of doing a feminist oral history method, I offered an initial invitation to share what I know of my adoption history, how I enter our conversations, and my arrival to this research upon meeting the narrators. Michael Frisch's notion of "shared authority" is a tall and necessary invitation of the researcher to intervene by shifting authority away from themselves and towards the narrator so as to gesture beyond unidirectional extractions of knowledge and meaning making.[63] It is not overlooked that the inevitable fact of the researcher and subject dynamic

[59] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 71.
[60] Jones-Gailani, "Towards an Affective Methodology," 63.
[61] Abrams, 34, 71.
[62] Abrams, 71.
[63] Abrams, 27.

concerns an unavoidable unequal relationship established in order to ask another person to share with me their memories for the purpose of research.[64] What I offered during the hours I spent with the narrators were my honest reflections, feelings, meaningful experiences and relationships as an adoptee. My attempts towards ethical and vulnerable engagements with these women's words continue long after the interview has formally ended and organize the contours of this work.

Communities of Asian Adoptees

Just before I left the States to move abroad for graduate school, I had become a part of Asian adoptee communities at my undergrad university and the larger metropolitan area. Across those groups, I had met two women who are narrators in this work and that I am particularly indebted to for their significant support and assistance in connecting me with the other women whose life stories are included in this research. This sampling procedure, often termed snowball sampling, involves the researcher's access to participants through contact information that is provided by other participants where the metaphor of the snowball touches on the accumulative dimensions central to this method.[65] The process of locating potential participants began in April 2023 and resulted in interviews with ten participants across twenty oral history sessions that took place mostly between June and September 2023, each of them being interviewed on two separate occasions. My decision to arrange two oral history sessions with each narrator was to create a safer space for adoptees through a greater time span that would not tightly constrain the exchange of our adoption stories. While I had known a few of the narrators beforehand, I became first acquainted with the majority of them during the first

[64] Abrams, 168.
[65] Chaim Noy, "Sampling Knowledge: The Hermeneutics of Snowball Sampling in Qualitative Research," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11, 4 (2008): 330, doi: 10.1080/13645570701401305. 330.

session. The two sessions thus became an important part of building trust and harboring a vulnerable sensitivity to the meanings and interpretations that mark adoptee experiences.

Most of the women I spoke with were young adults, aged between twenty-two and twenty-six, who were also all adopted from China during the steady rise of Chinese transnational adoption from the turn of the century. Among these young women also included one Vietnamese adoptee. The other women, aged between forty and fifty-one, were adopted from Korea during the peak years of Korean transnational adoption. Further, while all women shared heterosexual intimate relations, a few also describe their non-normative sexualities as bisexual, lesbian, or queer. Each of these terms carrying important theoretical and political distinctions, this work does not critically engage with how non-normative sexuality entwines with notions of race and gender through intimate relations. Instead, this work is limited to heteronormative structures of sexuality and gender that mold and are molded by ideas of race. All the narrators are anonymized with pseudonyms and details of their adoption histories, such as specific birth places and birth names, have been changed to protect identities of these women.

Because of the small number of participants and how relationships were formed with the participants, almost all the narrators knew each other, maintain friendships, or knew of one another. One narrator told me she wouldn't have agreed to participate in research, as an adoptee, if the researcher wasn't also adopted. She went onto explain how she shared this sentiment with another one of the narrator's who later confirmed she would be willing to speak with me. "I think that's why a lot of adoptees also have a hard time sharing because it makes people feel uncomfortable. And I think we often silence ourselves to make other people feel comfortable."[66] Being positioned as an insider in this regard allowed me to access

[66] Caroline Myers, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 5, 2023.

these women's narratives which I employ towards the goal of writing more inclusive histories of Asian transnational adoptees.

The Oral History Session

Nearly all of the sessions took place inside the narrator's homes, per my suggestion, in an effort to create a private yet comfortable and familiar space for the women to share their stories, experiences, and feelings. In the instances where sessions were unable to be conducted in the narrator's home, our conversations took place on the University of Louisville campus and other public spaces. In-person sessions took place in Kentucky, United States with the exception six virtual meetings. About a month into my fieldwork, I had received messages on social media from adopted Asian women located outside of Kentucky who were informed about my research from other participants and were interested in speaking with me. I initially intended to only interview women who currently resided in Kentucky to maintain the integrity of in-person conversations and keeping in mind how the political climate of the state, traditionally conservative, influenced their experiences and local discourses of race, sexuality, and gender, as well as their relations or proximity to other adoptees and Asians. Because most of the sessions were confirmed to take place in-person, including virtual sources offered an opportunity to contrast the topics and meanings discussed from the other sessions. Four sessions with two women, located in the Midwest and the Northeast region of the U.S., were completed on Zoom and Microsoft Teams between July and August 2023. The other two virtual sessions two other women were conducted in January and February 2024 due to scheduling complications.

A word of advice given to me before I embarked on my fieldwork gestured towards understanding these sessions not as interviews—in a traditional and formal sense—but rather as conversations that would make sense to me only after I had completed the first initial

sessions. While I anxiously clutched to my interview guide, what became instantly apparent was what I had let escape the room by hearing rather than "listening vulnerably" to the narrators.[67] Historian Lynn Abrams reminds us that oral history, as a form of historical research, is distinct precisely because it is primarily concerned with the *doing* of this practice rather than the content derived from it.[68] From then on, I parted ways with my interview guide and followed the invitations of the narrators to inquire further about what they chose to share with me and the meanings they ascribed to their experiences. Nonetheless, I entered the sessions with a general idea of what I was curious about learning that offered some direction through the conversations and included the women's adoption histories and experiences surrounding race, gender, and sexuality, inside and outside the white home. Throughout my conversations with the narrators, the process of "listening in stereo" became vital to understanding not only what was said but what was meant.[69] Tuning in to the narrator's feelings rather than "facts," this practice helps provide insight between conventional and muted channels of thought in oral history.[70] Mainstream discourses of Asian transnational adoption often maintain ideologies of U.S. paternalism, Asian exceptionalism, and idealized whiteness that require careful attention to how these women ascribe meaning to their personal experiences through dominant culture's prescriptions and the nuanced relationship between these channels.

Conclusion

As I was writing the analytical chapters of the thesis, I was awoken one morning to a disconcerting dream. In my inbox, I had received an email, complied by many of the

[67] See Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997).
[68] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 18; emphasis added.
[69] Kathryn Anderson and Dana Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses" in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 1998), 157.
[70] Anderson and Jack, "Learning to Listen," 157.

narrators, expressing their discontent with how I incorporated their histories into this work and what I had written about their experiences and intimate relations. I sat in front of my computer to a bulleted list of the specific moments each of the women disapproved of. The email concluded with a statement explaining that only under the condition that I change each listed detail would I receive their consent of participation in this research. My dream was perhaps no surprise since I had been faced with many anxieties in the process of writing about these women's oral histories. Many of these words have been typed through veils of tears. Reading, listening, writing, speaking, and thinking about and for this research has both shattered and mended parts of myself. That is, navigating through the personal reflected in the oral histories of other's I was writing about and the process of remembering the vulnerable conversations shared about loss, trauma, and injury. I have found myself seriously conflicted by the task of sitting at a desk for hours of the day to write about these women's interminable losses that are largely unknown and their histories that remain sieved with precarity.

The following chapters do not capture the many important experiences, relations, and feelings these women shared with me because of the multiple strenuous decisions I made around how and to what extent these women's oral sources take the written form of this research. Their words, and silences, remain in their oral form and are nevertheless central to this work and the intersubjective practice of doing oral history. We tailor our stories, in which we present the self, according to the purpose. Purpose is created with whom lends their ear to our voices located in a particular context and a particular moment that makes the possibility for endless versions of the pasts we bring into the present.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter One, "The Epistemic Ambiguities of Lost Histories," explores the legal paradigm of plenary adoptions that dominate the Asian transnational adoption industry. I

discuss how the state—adoption agencies, orphanages, and social welfare services—manufacture the orphan figure that preconditions the production of an "adoptable" child. Through this process, I offer the conceptual implications of how adoptees' lost histories are facilitated as racialized and gendered mechanisms. I conclude by outlining popular moralizing discourses of Asian transnational adoption emerging from Cold War conflict that continually efface adoptees' domains of loss.

Chapter Two, "The Management of Difference: Asian, American, Asian American," moves to the domestic domain of the white adoptive family to explore how the dominant national ethos of neoliberal multiculturalism occurs in this intimate space. I go on to discuss how adopted Asian women's difference is managed in the white family, as well as in the dominant public sphere, that underwrites vexed identifications with ideals of Asianness and whiteness. My discussion concludes by considering a process of identification building upon Franz Fanon's discussion of Jacques Lacan's mirror stage to offer a racialized mirror stage for the Asian transnational adoptee.

Chapter Three, "Racial and Sexual Exceptionalism: The Adopted Sexual Model Minority," turns to other intimate relations across the private sphere—that of adopted Asian women's sexual-romantic relations—to expound how ideals of whiteness and Asianness are contended with through heteronormative encounters. I first situate adopted Asian women along the longer history of gendered patterns of Asian migration and consumptive labor before detailing how processes of racial sexualization arrange them through the sexual model minority discourse. Outlining how they are reinscribed into discourses of colorblindness and multiculturalism, my discussion examines how these women are hyper-exceptionalized in dominant culture as a melancholic process.

Literature Review

Early Scholarship:1970s-1980s

Little scholarship on transnational adoption was produced until the 1970s, nearly twenty years after the institutionalization of transnational adoption between Korea and United States (1953) once the first Korean adoptees were already adults. While administrative files of the international social work organization, International Social Services (ISS), had depicted piercing critiques of Korean adoption practices by social workers within the organization, as well as those in state governments, these documents would only become published research much later in the 1970s.[71] Thus, the early research on transnational adoption would be dominated by social work and social policy that largely produced "outcome" or "adjustment" studies of transracial and transnationally adopted children and adolescents that underwrite the dominant narrative of Asian transnational adoption today: *Adoption is a win-all situation.*[72]

Research on transracial adoption, domestic and transnational, has been produced almost as long as the practice within the discipline of Social Work that today covers the majority of early adoptees' lifetimes and the entirety of the lifetimes for those adopted more recently.[73] Social workers and researchers were formative actors in determining accepted guidelines, recommendations, and policies surrounding adoption primarily because transracial adoptees and their families first encountered these professionals with whom they would work closely with.[74] Exploring the cultural implications of domestic adoption and engaged in public debates that foregrounded similar discourses surrounding transnational adoption, this group of researchers were influential in shaping popular ideas of transracial adoption as a problem or

[71] Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (Rutgers University Press, 2016), 73.
[72] Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 9.
[73] Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 72.
[74] Nelson, 72.

solution.[75] This early scholarship largely focused on the adoption of Black and Native American children against the landscape of civil rights struggles throughout the 1960s and 1970s that informed the significant shift towards Asian transnational adoption, in the 1980s and 1990s, assuring U.S citizen-subjects to expect few negative outcomes and that this was substantiated by scientific research.[76]

Perhaps most crucially, the work of Rita Simon and Howard Altstein has been accepted as a cornerstone of transracial adoption research.[77] Their work has been fortified as "expert knowledge" that is often utilized to support the putatively positive narrative of domestic and transnational systems of transracial adoption.[78] Having conducted sociological research for over thirty years on domestic and transnational adoption, Simon and Altstein maintain that the "adjustment" of transnational adoptees is sometimes better than domestic adoptees and non-adopted siblings, but is nevertheless no different.[79] This work formally declares transracial and transnational adoption as a "win-win situation" and observes adoptive families as productive members of society "at ease in a multi-racial world," urging social work to incorporate their findings into their practice and define transracial and transnational adoption as a legitimate and available option to "parentless" minority children.[80] Further echoed from Simon's earlier 1984 article, "Adoption of Black Children by White Parents in

[75] Nelson, 72-73.
[76] Nelson, 74.
[77] This triangulation is often referred to as the "adoption triad" in research, social work services and the adoption profession.
[78] See Rita J. Simon and Howard Altstein, *Adoption across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000); Rita J. Simon and Howard Altstein, *Transracial Adoption* (New York: Wiley, 1977); Rita J. Simon and Howard Altstein, *Transracial Adoptees and Their Families: A Study of Identity and Commitment* (New York: Praeger, 1987).
[79] Rita J. Simon and Howard Altstein, *Adoption across Borders: Serving the Children in Transracial and Intercountry Adoptions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).
[80] Simon and Altstein, *Adoption Across Borders*, 148-149.

the USA," involved the conclusion that colorblindness was the antidote for racism, a position echoed among many adoptive parents.[81]

This widely accepted research centers the perspectives of adoptive parents who also served as proxies for the experiences of their adopted children. Through a rhetoric of adjustment, racial and social assimilation is regarded as a positive indicator of the child's placement into their second families that obscure issues of racialization, already gendered and sexual, inside and outside of the white home. Nonetheless, as a sociological study, Simon and Altstein subsume the distinct adoption processes across the U.S. foster care system, domestic, and transnational adoption systems that insufficiently attend to the critical disparities among the participants and respective contexts they are situated within. Their oppositional stance to the public discourse at the time that heavily criticized transracial adoption, most notably marked by the statement of the National Social Workers Association (to be later discussed), is reflected in their assumptions and methods of these empirical studies that fatefully neglect discussing the theoretical and political implications of racialization and gendered sexuality by and for adoptees.[82] Nevertheless, this scholarship shaped the emergence of adoption studies and its legacy remains potent in the U.S. imaginary today.[83]

Two critical considerations that are inadequately considered by Simon and Altstein are central to this research—the perspectives of transnational adoptees and an analytical frame of loss, as a racialized and gendered process. Understanding the politics of loss for transnational adoptees seeks to challenge the powerful view of transnational adoption their findings

[81] See Rita J. Simon, "Adoption of Black Children by White Parents in the USA," in *Adoption: Essays in Social Policy, Law, and Sociology*, ed. Phillip Bean (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1984), 229–242.
[82] At the time, the adoption industry also opposed these critiques by framing them as anti-child—an abstraction of race through multicultural fantasies of racial progress.
[83] Static constructions of happy or angry, maladjusted or adjusted, grateful and ungrateful adoptees are established through this early "scientific" research, as well as "pre-adoption" and "postadoption" phases of adoptee development as a linear and developmental process that inform tendencies to pathologize transnational and domestic adoptees against dominant ideals of the U.S. nation-state. See Sara Dorow, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 24.

maintain—children get a "better life" with a second family, and these families in turn get a child. By framing the lived narratives of transnationally adopted Asian women, this work interrogates how their experiences of immigration, assimilation and racialization are arranged through power asymmetries of loss. Put otherwise, this thesis is not concerned with the losses for adoptive families—fertility complications and the dominant ideal of family making—but examines how adoptees' losses are consequential to the desires to reproduce by way of adopting.

Turn of the Century: 1990s to Present

Just before Chinese transnational adoption would double by the late 1990s from the onset of the decade, adoption scholarship began to incorporate approaches and critiques from critical race studies and postcolonial theory, as well as greater focus on adoptee self-reports. However, while many of these studies turned to race and ethnicity, the tendencies to conflate or essentialize them sometimes led to facile and uninterrogated notions of "culture" that uphold the normative paradigm of race *as* culture.[84] That is, ideas of cultural essentialism thus naturalize racial difference through the depoliticized language of U.S. multiculturalism that dissipate transnational adoptees' specific racial histories of colonialism, gender stratification, and capitalist exploitation.[85] This research explores how adopted women's difference is organized through conflations of race, ethnicity, and culture that position them across categories of Asian and American. Shifting to the field of Asian American studies, the following literature examines transnational adoptee subjectivity and histories of Asian transnational adoption.

[84] Richard Lee, "The Transracial Adoption Paradox: History, Research, and Counseling Implications of Cultural Socialization," *The Counseling Psychologist* 31(6), (2003): 711-44, https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000003258087 in Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 10.

[85] See David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (New York: Duke University Press, 2010).

I rely on several works by David Eng who works across psychoanalysis, queer theory, Asian American studies, and affect theory to discuss the politics of family and kinship and Asian migration, often co-authoring with Shinhee Han.[86] Most considerably, Eng's discussion in *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* has informed many of the discussions this work wades through. Eng examines U.S. supreme court cases, a psychoanalytic case history of a Korean transnational adoptee, and several cultural productions-novels, films, and documentaries to demonstrate the emergence of what he terms "queer liberalism"—the empowerment of certain gay and lesbian citizen-subjects in the United States through a "mass-mediated queer consumer lifestyle"—post-Stonewall riots (1969) and economic shift to neoliberalism from the 1980s onwards—alongside the legal protection of rights to privacy and intimacy. He explains while gays and lesbians have been historically renounced from the normative space of family and kinship, today liberal demands of recognition and state legitimacy through adoption, same-sex marriage, inheritance, and custody marks this resignification of the private realm. Eng argues that queer liberalism works in tandem with the logic of colorblindness that abets a "forgetting of race and the denial of racial difference."[87] That is, queer liberalism opposes a politics of intersectionality by resisting the acknowledgement of how sexuality and race are co-constituted and can serve to frame and subsume the other's legibility in the social arena. For Eng, the "completion" of the racial project which scripts the emergence of colorblindness in the United States is the condition that permits the "historical emergence of queer freedom as the latest political incarnation of the 'rights of man.'"[88] While Eng discusses Asian transnational adoption by

[86] See David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (New York: Duke University Press, 2010).; David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Duke University Press, 2001); David Eng and Shinhee Han. "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia." *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 10, 4 (2000): 667–700. doi:10.1080/10481881009348576; David Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (New York: Duke University Press, 2019).
[87] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 4.
[88] Eng, 4.

white queer citizen-subjects, my research is limited to Asian transnational adoptees adopted by white families consisting of heterosexual marriages and single women. Nonetheless, his work underlines the centrality of how heteronormative structures of gender and sexuality help to consolidate white, middle-class ideals of family and kinship and how the law of colorblindness indexes this affective space in the private realm. Crucially, Eng outlines how racial contradictions of Asian transnational adoptees subjectivity are managed within this space that arrange a psycho-social terrain of conflict.

Second generation Korean American psychology scholar, Richard Lee, terms these contradictions as the "transracial adoption paradox" through his efforts to contribute to the interstices of Asian American studies and counseling psychology.[89] He explains both transnational and domestic adoptees confront their subject position as racialized minorities in society that is seemingly contradicted by their "perce[ption] and treat[ment] by others, and sometimes themselves, as if they are members of the majority culture" because of their adoption into a white family.[90] Otherwise said, Asian adoptees are not viewed as white because they become part of the white adoptive family despite embodying a racialized body. While Lee explores the psychological and cultural implications of this paradox, I bring Eng's discussions of colorblindness and multiculturalism to consider the political and theoretical implications of this contradictory subjectivity for transnationally adopted Asian women. I situate this under the mandates of U.S.-led neoliberalism to consider how the refusal and acknowledgement of racial difference is entwined with heteronormative meanings of gender and sexuality that underwrite the exceptionalization of Asian adoptees, as baby girls and women.

[89] See Richard Lee, "The Transracial Adoption Paradox: History, Research, and Counseling Implications of Cultural Socialization," *The Counseling Psychologist* 31, 6 (2003): 711-44.
[90] Lee, "The Transracial Adoption," 711.

Kim Park Nelson, Korean adoptee scholar, describes the racial exceptionalism for adoptees as children through a historical overview of the Cold War affairs entwined with the rise of contemporary Asian transnational adoption working specifically within the context of Korea. [91] She provides a comprehensive oral history study with sixty-six Korean adoptees that includes first generation Korean adoptees, adopted in the 1950s and 1960s, to detail where powerful narratives of Cold War orphans are first established. Nelson argues these adoptees symbolize a racial exceptionalism as all-American children that mold a highly visibilized success story and signify U.S. superiority in the ideological Cold War. Historian Catherine Ceniza Choy's, second-generation Filipino American, also provides a historical account of this process of racialization by analyzing the archives from the International Social Services United States of America Branch (ISS-USA).[92] Working across Asian American history and migration studies, Choy's work animates the trajectory of ISS-USA work over time and throughout Asia that departs from existing scholarship focused on Korean transnational adoption as well as historical and ethnographic studies of U.S. domestic adoption. Choy argues describes a turning point in the history of Asian transnational adoption by the ISS-USA, given that the practice of racial matching dominated U.S. domestic adoptions at the time and influenced the processing of adoptions abroad, which racialized Chinese children through a "flexible" racial difference. Providing the largely undocumented history of Chinese international adoption that precedes the popularized migration of Chinese adoptees in the 1990s amidst the "one-child policy," Choy details the ISS-USA's arrangement of Chinese international adoptions, in coordination with Hong Kong social welfare agencies, through the introduction of the Hong Kong Project that recruited adoptive families in the United States from the 1950s. In a 1958 ISS newsletter, the two-year program was announced, and the ISS-

[91] See Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (Rutgers University Press, 2016.)
[92] See Catherine Choy, *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2013).

USA began by recruiting Chinese American families, often related to the child or knew then through a friend or other intermediary, to adopt Chinese refugee children whose families fled from mainland China to Hong Kong. However, amid the burgeoning interest among white citizen-subjects to adopt a Chinese child, the ISS-USA concluded that transracial, transnational adoptions could work seemingly well by emphasizing the "flexibility and resilience" of adopted Chinese children.[93] From then on, the departure from race matching would undergird the next thirty years of Chinese transnational adoption. Both Nelson and Choy examine this process of racialization from a historical perspective in the contexts of Korea and China, however I expand on how this configuration of racial exceptionalism is gendered that outlines the dominant association of Asian transnational adoption with baby girls that normalizes their orientation towards the white heteronormative middle-class family, particularly in the wake of Cold War conflict and U.S. civil rights movements.

Cultural anthropologist Eleana Kim, a second-generation Korean American born in Canada to North Korean refugees, discusses the geo-political tensions of the Cold War through the symbolic power of the orphan figure. [94] Through a historical analysis and ethnography of Korean adoptee kinship, I develop her examination of adoptees' lost histories to demarcate the production of the orphan figure within a transnational system of child welfare harnessed by market rationalities. While Kim's discussion focuses on the material effects the construction of the orphan has on adult adoptees across networks and activities of adopted Koreans, my contribution attempts to consider the conceptual considerations surrounding this legal category for adopted Asian women whose histories remain ambiguous. Adopted Korean scholar Ryan Gustafsson tends to such theoretical insights of transnational

[93] Choy, *Global Families*, 50.
[94] See Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

adoptee subjectivity.[95] Working within cultural studies, they describe an "epistemological ambiguity" as adoptees' impossibility of knowing their histories prior to adoption and the ambiguous value of any knowledge gained, premised on the plenary adoption paradigm, that is fundamental to Korean transracial adoptee subjectivity. That is, the object of knowledge does not rest on a "true self" for adoptees to discover, made complete, or be "healed" from but rather involves an "unanswerable and hence unending" questioning. They contend this task of self-knowledge for the modern subject is performative and renders the subject intelligible and legitimate, thus, positioning the adoptee between the modern injunction to "know thyself" and the neoliberal imperative to "make oneself."[96] I explore this concept as epistemic ambiguity in a U.S. context for Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese adoptees to describe historical processes of lost dominant ideals that constitute the basic structure of social personhood–genealogical history and family lineage-as a structure of racial melancholia.

Conclusion

This review of literature has provided an overview of early scholarship on transnational adoption from Asia dominated by social work and social policy since the 1970s towards a shift in humanities and social sciences perspectives with the turn of the century. Apprehending transnational adoption as a particular form immigration, these more recent works critically inquire towards the way that public histories of war and militarization, colonialism, nationalism, race and gender are encrypted into the privatized realm of the domestic.[97] It is this remapping of the boundary between public and private that this research

[95] See Ryan Gustafsson, "Theorizing Korean Transracial Adoptee Experiences: Ambiguity, Substitutability, and Racial Embodiment," *International Journal of Cultural Studies 24*, no.2 (2021): https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920938374.
[96] Gustafsson,"Theorizing Korean Transracial," 313. See Kimberly Leighton, "Being Adopted and Being a Philosopher: Exploring Identity and the 'Desire to Know' Differently," in *Adoption Matters: Philosophical and Feminist Essays*, edited by Sally Haslanger and Charolette Witt (London and New York: Cornell University Press, 2005),146-170. See also Michel Foucault, "Subjectivity and Truth," in *The Politics of Truth*, edited by Sylvere Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), 171-98.
[97] For the emerging field of critical adoption studies, see Margaret Homans, et al., "Critical Adoption Studies: Conversation in Progress," *Adoption & Culture* 6, 1 (2018): 1-49.

is grounded upon with particular attention to race, gender, and sexuality. This thesis relies most heavily on the work published since 2010 to explicate the gendered and sexual particularities of adoptee subjectivity for transnationally adopted Asian women in the United States. I aim to discuss how gender governs not just the structural conditions from which Asian transnational adoption practices emerge but also how gender, race, and sexuality constitute the subjectivation of transnationally adopted Asian women. This work is grounded in a politics of loss, as a theoretical frame, that contests regnant ideas of Asian transnational adoption as a moral good, a benevolent humanitarian act, and a "win-all" lottery of reproduction and family making. By figuring transnational adoption through a dialectic of loss and desire, this research leans towards the space of the intimate—family, marriage, sexual-romantic relations—where meanings of race and culture, gender and sexuality, and nation and citizenship are continually created and negotiated.

Chapter One: The Epistemic Ambiguities of Lost Histories

Introduction

> I was six months old when I came to the U.S… It was funny, in undergrad, I had to do some kind of like family tree kind of activity. I went to talk to my professor and I was like—well, I really don't know. You know, I was adopted. So I was like 18 or 19 at the time and it was the first time—I actually looked at all the papers, the paperwork that my [second] mother had. So I did find out that I was— in a foster home with a married couple and I believe one of their parents or one set of their parents for the time that I was in Korea. But the actual like how I came to be there—which I'm a little bit suspect about like whether the documents up to that point were accurate or whether it was falsified, because I don't know if you've heard about Holt, the adoption agency Holt. And there's been a lot of false kind of documents and records. So I was adopted through Holt. So now it seems like very generic. It says like, oh, "found by a passerby on such and such bridge and brought the police." So now I don't know if that's actually true or not.[98]

Rachel, age fifty-one and adopted from Korea, recalls how the task of filling out a family tree, a visual configuration of one's genealogy, accentuated the epistemic conditions of ambiguity that outline her personal adoption history through the precarities of relinquishment. Nearly two decades prior to her adoption, Harry and Bertha Holt, Christian evangelicals and Oregon farmers, adopted eight mixed race babies born to Korean women and U.S. military servicemen in 1955 during the immediate aftermath of the Korean War. Soon after, they established the Holt Adoption Agency, today known as Holt International Children's Services, that Rachel's parents would go through to facilitate her migration to the U.S. Holt has become almost synonymous with Korean transnational adoption today as a Christian "rescue" mission that incited transnational and transracial adoption into the U.S. imaginary which remains as one of the leading global adoption agencies. What was notable about Harry and Bertha Holt was their lobbying efforts that pushed the U.S. and Korean governments to pass legislature, often individual special acts approved by Congress, to facilitate the first wave

[98] Rachel Anderson, virtual interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 24, 2023.

Korean babies into U.S. families by the 1950s against the backdrop of Asian exclusion from the mid-nineteenth century.

Legal provisions barring immigration to those from Asian countries were put into place in 1875 through the enforcement of the Page Law, which is largely understood to be the first federal immigration policy in the United States that outlawed all contract labor from "China, Japan, or any Oriental country," yet specifically prohibited the entry of Chinese women.[99] The ensuing anti-Asian U.S. immigration policies, including the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the 1907 Gentleman's Agreement with Japan, and Immigration Act of 1924, outline histories of exclusion from the late 19th-century where grassroots lobbying initiatives by U.S. adoptive parents and adoption agencies from the 1950s, such as the Holts, would shape and be shaped by the significant shift in immigration statute underwritten by the geopolitical tensions of the Cold War. Further, the 1957 Refugee-Escapee Act entailed the admission of certain "aliens" fleeing persecution from Communist areas or any country in the Middle East, hereinafter West Asia and North Africa (WANA), and would be the first legislation to refer to adoptees as refugees.[100] Moreover, the tale of the Holt's "testifies to God's ability to use ordinary people to bring about extraordinary change" and would capture the imagination of white, middle-class U.S. America marking a salient shift in immigration legislature and intimate links between the United States and Korea.[101] Over the next fifty years, transnational adoptions from Korea, China, and Vietnam would become popular "sending" countries of infants and children to the United States.

During the hours I spent with narrators in their homes, they shared with me their personal adoption histories and I took note of how frames of uncertainty and unknowability

[99] San Diego State University, "The Page Act of 1875."
[100] U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, "Legislation from 1941-1960."
[101] Eleana Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 43.

molded how they have come to know themselves in relation to others, and also in relation to time and space. My discussion aims to outline adopted Asian women's lost histories and histories of loss who are brought to the United States as babies, ranging from as early as four months up to fifteen months, situated within a global market of stratified reproduction. Racial melancholia describes the politics of loss not as a fixed pathology but as a vital component of daily existence and survival that shifts over time and space concerted to evolving patterns of immigration that condition emerging psycho-social formations and plights for their subjects.[102] Throughout this chapter, I will attempt to articulate the central importance of epistemic losses for transnational adoptees that arises through the racialized and gendered project of producing the adoptee subject. I begin by the outlining the larger paradigm of plenary adoption to explicate how adoptees' "pre-histories," the social and historical conditions which facilitate their placement into the white adoptive family, are severed by the state and adoption agencies to further produce the adoptee subject.[103] Turning to the context of Korean transnational adoption, I discuss how production of the transnational adoptee involves the construction of children as orphans that makes them adoptable. From this, my analysis first considers how the production of adoptees' ambiguous pre-histories complicates the relationship between time and personhood that reveal the ways in which adoptee subjectivity begins with loss. Lastly, my discussion shifts to the site of the white adoptive family to explore the continuous project of producing the transnational adoptee subject through registers of loss and Cold War politics.

The visible figure of Asian baby girls in transnational adoption reflects domestic and international histories of race, kinship norms, population policies, and patriarchy. Isabel, age

[102] David Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (New York: Duke University Press, 2019), 23. See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
[103] Ryan Gustafsson, "Theorizing Korean Transracial Adoptee Experiences: Ambiguity, Substitutability, and Racial Embodiment," *International Journal of Cultural Studies 24*, no.2 (2021): 313, https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920938374.

twenty-four and adopted from China, explained an immense shame about being a girl during her younger years when she asks, "what is it about being a girl that makes me not wanted?"[104] The disposition of racial melancholia—lost dominant ideals–is already gendered and sexual for adopted Asian women because transnational adoption is a gendered form of immigration that has saturated the U.S. imaginary. This gendered history of contemporary Asian immigration reveals the privileged migration of Chinese girls to the United States, most notably after a series of birth planning restrictions emerging in the early 1980s—the "one-child policy."[105] In attempts to evade these regulations, typically lower-class parents in the countryside would adopt out their child, usually a girl, to a pool of legally qualified subjects who were childless, above a certain age, and presumably infertile.[106] In some cases, these domestic adoptions were temporary and in other cases they were permanent. This attempt to evade the penalties of the violating the birth quota also allowed first parents to try again for a son.[107] What ensued concerned the birth planning authorities that began to enforce stronger regulations on adoption policy and by late 1991, amidst a massive birth planning crackdown in areas of the countryside, adoption regulations became codified in the first national adoption law of the People's Republic of China that came into effect in April 1992.[108] This gendered technology of state-controlled reproduction, thus, coincided with U.S. interests in figments of exotic and demure Chinese baby girls. Sara Dorow explains this figure as the "flexible Asian female" who became flexibly rescuable in contrast to abjected (black, older, differently abled)

[104] Isabel Martin, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 23, 2023.
[105] David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (New York: Duke University Press, 2010), 107; Kay Johnson, "Chaobao: The Plight of Chinese Adoptive Parents in the Era of the One-Child Policy," in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption*, ed. by Toby Alice Volkman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 122.
[106] Johnson, "Chaobao," 123.
[107] Johnson, "Chaobao," 122.
[108] Johnson, 124.

and difficulty attained (white, young, healthy) children that rendered them "different but not too different."[109]

Gendered and patriarchal histories of transnational adoption are disparate according to their specific national and temporal contexts. In the context of Korea, Kim notes how its modernization process further implicated existing gender and class stratifications. By the end of the 1950s, the majority of overseas adoptions consisted of relinquished children largely because of extreme poverty and insufficient social service support.[110] She details:

> A preference for sons was evident in the sex ratio of children adopted throughout the 1960s and 1970s, during which time between 60 and 70 percent were girls. But since the 1980s, as the average family size shrank and the main cause for adoption relinquishments shifted from poverty to out-of-wedlock births, gender ratios have become nearly evenly balanced. In addition, because domestic adopters have shifted their preferences from boys to girls in the last decade, an excess of boys is now being adopted overseas.[111]

Local patriarchal ideologies and structures of family and kinship are specific to shifting class and gender relations across the domestic and international contexts of "sending" countries. What has become cemented in the white U.S. imaginary is the powerful image of the Asian girl as the face of transnational adoption, perhaps most influenced by China's infamous "one-child policy," that homogenizes distinct class and gender structures which inform transnational adoption practices, as in the case of Korea. This figure also operates through the paternalist tendencies of the U.S. nation-state which mark the adoption of girls as its naturalized duty. Thus, white Western configurations that condemn patriarchal structures in East and Southeast Asia for influencing the "availability" of girls "waiting" to be adopted functions to buttress the United States through the tale of gender, as well as racial, equality

[109] Sara Dorow, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (NYU Press: 2006), 55, 58, 67.
[110] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 35.
[111] Kim, 35.

and freedom. By occluding the historical emergence of transnational Asian adoption as a result of the sexual relations between local women and U.S. servicemen by which Japan, Korea, and Vietnam were under U.S. occupation, U.S. sexual imperialism operates to "save" these children from institutions of military prostitution it created and sustained, co-facilitated by Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. From this, the androcentric U.S. nation-state and the white heteronormative middle-class family in the global North are naturalized as conduits through which Asian girls are "rescued" from gender oppressive structures they would have otherwise been persecuted by had they not been adopted. In the task of gendering racial melancholia, this chapter aims to discuss adopted Asian women's losses through this process of gendered immigration, as well as processes of racialization and assimilation.

Producing the Transnational Adoptee Subject

Conventional apprehensions of transnational adoption understand adoptees as once orphaned children often incited from conditions of wartime, conflict, and poverty. The orphan figure is thus conceptualized as a child whose parents' have departed, died, or otherwise incapable of raising the child.[112] Yet, the extent and circumstances to which adoptees are freely relinquished points to legal practices and processes that reveal how orphan status is established by adoption agencies and the state that dictate the possibility for a child to be adopted. Processes of transnational adoption largely operate within a "clean break" paradigm that privilege irrevocable adoptions wherein the legal separation of the child requires its orphan status determined by the sending or giving country.[113] This declaration of orphanhood establishes its legal abandonment as not coerced or induced but freely consented to by the

[112] Eleana Kim, "Our Adoptee, Our Alien: Transnational Adoptees as Specters of Foreignness and Family in South Korea," Anthropological Quarterly 80, 2 (2007): 520; Hosu Kim, *Birth Mothers and Transnational Adoption Practice in South Korea: Virtual Mothering* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 96.
[113] Barbra Ygnvesson, "Transnational Adoption and European Immigration Politics: Producing the National Body in Sweden," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 19, 1 (2012): 328, https://doi.org/10.2979/indjglolegstu.19.1.327.

parent that functions as the condition before adoption can take place.[114] However, Hosu Kim explains in the context of Korea, "the relinquishment of a child did not *always* require the informed consent of the birth mother" as legal guardians, grandparents, or relatives with custody to were permitted to finalize the adoption.[115] Ryan Gustafsson explains that until 2008, Korea used the patrilineal family registry (hojuk) system denoting the man as the family head of the household, along with his wife and dependents.[116] Therefore, adoption agencies created an orphanhood, administratively known as "orphan hojuk," to facilitate potential adoptions into the existing legal framework that listed the child "as a family head of its own" stripping the child of social identities to make it adoptable.[117] In this sense, the adoptees' genealogical "beginning" is re-written to construct itself as the head of its family through the deployment of orphanhood.

The category of the orphan manufactures the bodies of children as "legible, free-standing subjects of the state."[118] From this, adoption can be distinguished from kidnapping and child trafficking. Through the accordance of orphan status, complexities of relinquishment are obscured that do not necessarily entail the absence of coercion or other forms of social and class pressures that lead first mothers to relinquish their children. The very premise of the orphan reveals how the intricate relationship between the state and adoption agencies makes its own subject. Such actors are deeply implicated in a system oriented "toward the efficient processing of children for adoption rather than towards preserving existing kinship relations" where a child's proclaimed orphan status further calcifies

[114] Ygnvesson, "Transnational Adoption," 328.
[115] Kim, *Birth Mothers*, 6.
[116] Gustafsson, "Theorizing Korean Transracial," 312.
[117] Kim, "Our Adoptee," 521.
[118] Kim, "Our Adoptee," 521.

fabricated genealogies and family lineages in the making of the adoptable child. [119] Cultural anthropologist Eleana Kim writing in the context of Korea states:

> For many adoptees, origin stories are unstable fragments of received information. Adoptees who have searched for or found natal family often discover that the few bits of data that they possessed about their pasts are, in fact, fabrications or inaccuracies. They find that they are one or two years older or younger, for instance, or that they were never true orphans, or that their names had been changed more than once along the process of moving between orphanages and agencies.[120]

Holt is one of many agencies that has received great scrutiny over the years for practices of falsified or doctored information of children's records, including their birth dates, names, locations, relatives, and orphan status that reflect the bureaucratic procedures of institutionalized transnational adoption.[121] Adoption agencies and welfare facilities can thus be considered actors of "biopower" where power takes life as its object under universalisms of the child's best interests.[122] The orphan figure preconditions the adoptee subject through its transference from that family to this family premised on the exclusive belonging from that nation to this nation.[123] This execution of plenary adoptions ensures the child's "blank slate" to fortify the prospect of second families to raise them as their "own." Through this project of producing the adoptable child, their pasts have been severed and retained only in uncertifiable fractures before the adoptee child body can be disembed to be rembedded into a new space. By erasing and producing new knowledges of the adoptee's personal history, they are undone or a "becoming-bare" that is a simultaneous re-making or "becoming-adoptable across space and time."[124]

[119] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 33.
[120] Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 90.
[121] Gustafsson, "Theorizing Korean," 312.
[122] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage, 1978).
[123] Barbara Ygnvesson, "Going 'Home:' Adoption, Loss of Bearings, and the Mythology of Roots" in *Cultures of Transnational Adoption* edited by Toby Alice Volkman (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 26.
[124] Gustafsson, "Theorizing Korean Transracial," 312.

Happy Birthday

Stories of relinquishment, what adoptees have come to know as relinquishment, instantiate the precarity of Asian transnational adoptee subjectivity through the elusive contours of their beginnings. Conventional apprehensions of personhood, specifically of subjects in the diaspora, articulate biocentric and consanguineous notions of belonging and being. David Eng writes:

> Diaspora is firmly attached to genealogical notions of racial descent, filiation, and biological traceability. Configuring diaspora as displacement from a lost homeland or exile from an exalted origin can thus underwrite regnant ideologies of nationalism, while upholding virulent notions of racial purity and its structuring heteronormative logics of gender and sexuality.[125]

Rather than ideas of blood relations or other notions of biogenetic essentialisms, what I came to take notice of was how adoptees' narratives of their beginnings were molded across frames of time, often appearing through the life event of the birthday.[126] From

[125] David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (New York: Duke University Press, 2010), 13.

[126] As the practice of Asian transnational adoption has shifted over time to appeal to the demands of adoptive parents, who have sought infants rather than non-infant children, most of the women who spoke with me were adopted before the age of one. See Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (Rutgers University Press, 2016) for a comprehensive oral history research on Korean transnational adoptees. This account depicts adoptees' memories of first families and homes for those over the age of forty, who migrated as older children between the 1950s and 1970s. The question of memory regarding life before adoption did not arise in my conversations and what became evident was how transnational adoptees who migrate as infants experience loss without knowing exactly what they have lost. From this, we might consider how the popular demand to adopt infants over older children then consolidates the larger project of producing the transnational adoptee subject where age is considered excess for certain lives. The managed vacancy of adoptees' memories of their first families are conducive to forming new attachments to their second families that make their losses of the former nebulous. Several of the women who spoke with me explained how they only came to question the stories presented by their second families about their adoption, their relationships to their second parents and families, and to themselves as adopted people later in their lives. Thus, the task of questioning one's familial relations by way of transnational adoption where strangers become family is strenuous precisely because adoptees are faced with questioning that which they cannot always remember. In other words, adopting infants interjects with the earliest stage of being alive in the world that curtails the possibilities of time to form memorable relations. With no memories of the life before adoption, transnational adoptees are placed into new kinship formations that make remembering those who have become unknown to them far from possible. Importantly, I am not suggesting that memory, or the process of remembering, is a reliable guarantor of the past. The women's narrative accounts are entangled in the memories and knowledge of their second families that in turn are used to shape their own life timelines.

this, I turn to the temporal dimensions of migration that transnational adoptees are constructed through.

> I was adopted at nine months—Meizhou, Guangdong province. I don't know if you know where that is but it's South-ish—by my mom—who is a white lady. And it's just my single mother. So she went to get me when she was 45… Well—she told me that when I was a baby—I guess the day I was born—I was left on the side of the street. And some ladies who were walking by found me, picked me up and took me to the orphanage. So—they don't really know anything about me really but my birthday—which I'm also like—how do you know it's my birthday?[127]

Emily, Chinese adoptee and age twenty-three, grew up in Pennsylvania and moved to Kentucky for college. Due to her second mother's research on China as professor, Emily returned to China to live for some time when she was still a young child. As Emily told me what she has been told of her adoption history, she posed an inquiry similarly echoed by another narrator. Natalie, also adopted from China and age twenty-two, tells me:

> I was found in Huaian in the Jiangsu province—which is kind of—China—and sort of the central eastern coast. I don't really know how to describe it. I know I was found— there. Allegedly it was outside of a supermarket—and I was told that I still had my umbilical cord. So they kind of tried to—I guess—pick my birth date based on that. Different things say that there maybe was a note left, but other things say that there wasn't. So it's kind of hard to know. Like, was there actually anything?[128]

Age twenty-six and Chinese adoptee, Lauren mentions what she knows of her adoption, as well as her older sister who is also adopted from China:

> I was dropped off at an actual orphanage and then my sister—she was dropped off at a train station—I think—is what they—what we know of so far. But—other than that, there's no information, like really—from the orphanage and all that other stuff. I don't think there was anything left. And—what I've always known is they just give you a birthday, like the doctor there just gives you a birthday so there's no birth certificate or anything like that.[129]

[127] Emily Kensington, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, June 10, 2023.
[128] Natalie Scott, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, June 22, 2023.
[129] Lauren Miller, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, June 7, 2023.

The epistemic ambiguity for transnational adoptees concerns the conditions of loss that hinder the possibility to know the personal history of the self-prior to her adoption and the ambiguous value of any knowledge received.[130] Nevertheless, the epistemic turmoil of unknowability and uncertainty that adoptees are confronted with and establish themselves from accentuates the task of locating the self through time. The birthday, understood as a ritual of temporality, articulates normative notions of personhood that locate historical subjects in time through the commemoration of one's beginning; an affirmative act of being. While the birthday has become a transnational phenomenon, articulated through vast cultural and historical particularities, I position the life event of the birthday within the specific horizon of U.S. subjectivity making through processes of racialization. That is, U.S. subject formation privileges this bureaucratic instrument as a cornerstone of making a self that belongs by birth and denies racialized adoptee subjects to this temporal tenant of self-making within dominant culture.

Adoptees' birthdays mark an epistemic ambiguity that instills the loss of this dominant temporal ideal as a racialized loss that invokes a misrecognition of the adoptee as a temporal subject. That is, the ambiguity of their given birthdays are losses insofar as white norms of U.S. subjectivity privilege this bureaucratic tool as a bedrock of social personhood. This racialized loss of time thus reveals how the Asian adoptee is abjected from this white bureaucratic measurement of subject formation that expounds an instance of racial melancholia. Established from process of immigration and racialization that produce the Asian transnational adoptee subject, their deliberately opaque beginnings function as the precondition to their U.S. subjecthood that foreground this lost dominant ideal. Moreover, the

[130] See Ryan Gustafsson, "Theorizing Korean Transracial Adoptee Experiences: Ambiguity, Substitutability, and Racial Embodiment," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 24, .2 (2021): https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877920938374.

adoptees' knowability of the temporal self is foreclosed by the elusive information disseminated to them; a haunting speculation, where the life event of the adoptees' ambiguous birthday memorializes the loss of being in the past and present that regulates the negation of futurity. This fragmentary subjectivity concerns the dilemma of recognition by norms of U.S. dominant culture as racialized citizen-subjects whose migration to the United States is premised on this inability to establish the self by the birthday.

Isabel, age twenty-four and adopted from China, explains how her adoption was talked about growing up:

> In some kind of messed up way, which she [second mother] jokes about—well, she's very grateful for it. She ended up getting me, like actually receiving me on her birthday. She thinks it's a great thing—and I'm kind of like, that's not really something that you can rejoice about. She said I was found in a snow bank next to a post office…The orphanage just guessed—how old I was and gave me a birthday. That was another thing that I didn't realize until I was older—how messed up that is. Everybody knows—yep, I was born in Norton Hospital at 3:18 PM on Tuesday, the 26th of April and my moon sign is—[laugher]—I think there's something—in not even knowing when you were born… She always just says—you were the best birthday present I got. But just celebrating her birthday—it's also as gotcha day. It's just very weird because she's—I don't know, really insecure. She always expects presents and a card on her birthday like Mother's Day. And she also quantifies it in a way so it can't just be a pair of socks. It has to be—meaningful or it's not a pretty sight. So just because it's so forced and also just the weight of the day, it feels like an act to me in a way. Just getting her a present and—thanking her for getting me. And—yeah, I kind of feel like a pet store attraction sometimes.[131]

The rhetoric of the gift and gratitude animate the nuances of adoption involving the relationship between commodification and care where the adopted child is both a "gift of love" and object of desire. Anthropologist Barbra Yngvesson suggests a seemingly irresolvable tension between the "gift child" and market practices that make her priceless as a function of the "double evocatory power", in the words of Marilyn Strathern, of gifts in

[131] Isabel Martin, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 23, 2023.

commodity thinking.[132] She notes that for an object to become a gift, it must become freestanding, from a producer and constituted as "part of a[n anonomyous] store on which others draw," wherein gifts are alienable like any other commodity.[133] Once given, they become the means of establishing relationships wherein "giving" is interpreted as a function of love.[134] Yet, this is only possible, for Yngvesson, insofar as they are (imagined as) "free" or "freely given" as the compelled gift is an oxymoron as it enters a relation of indebtedness to the receiver. Yngvesson continues by asserting that the conceptualization of the relinquished child as a gift constitutes the relations involved as familial within an economy where family is imagined as non-contractual or "natural" and not of law:

> Indeed, the given child constitutes the adoptive family as "family," almost as though no adoption had taken place at all. It is precisely the complex identity of the adopted child as, on one hand, a "gift of love" that makes a family (complete), and, on the other, a "resource" that has been contractually alienated from one owner so that it can be attached to another, that produces the contradictions of adoptive kinship, the ambiguities of adoption law, and the creative tension in practices that surround the construction of adoptive families.[135]

Viviana Zelizer further touches on this contradiction by arguing that children become both "priceless" and "commodified" the instance their value is dissolved from the formal labor market.[136] Nevertheless, the transnational adoptee is "emblematic of both gift and goods as she moves from East to West, and from the space of public orphanage to the domain of private family."[137]

The gendered reference to astrology reflects the popular trend of self-making, reliant on birth date and time, that conjures an epistemic loss for Isabel who is troubled by the

[132] Marilyn Strathern, "Partners and Consumers," in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity* edited by Alan Schrift (New York: Routledge, 1997) 301; Barbra Yngvesson, "Placing the 'Gift Child' in Transnational Adoption," *Law & Society Review* 36, 2 (2002): 235, https://doi.org/10.2307/1512176., 235.
[133] Shrathern, 302, Yngvesson, 235.
[134] Shrathern, 303.
[135] Yngvesson, 235.
[136] Viviana A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).
[137] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 109.

exclusion from this affirmative act of the self. Instead, the celebratory event of the second mother's birthday overwrites her concurrent "gotcha day." Gotcha Day, also referred to as adoption day, marks when adoptees meet their second families often taking place in airports and hotels.[138] Thus, the first gotcha day signifies the adoptees' new world of social recognition embraced by their white adoptive families. Gotcha day, a shortened version of "I got you," linguistically privileges referent "I" of the white family that becomes a temporal ritual signifying a new beginning of the adoptee's second life split between at least two families, two nations, and two selves where one comes to take the place of another. Insofar as Isabel is her second mother's "best birthday present," gotcha day takes the place of Isabel's actual (assumed) birthday where the act of birthing is signified through the process of gift-giving wherein she is mandated to thank her second mother for adopting her. The displacement of gratitude upon Isabel evinces the contradiction of the "gift child" who cannot freely give herself to the white adoptive mother yet is indebted to her as a "resource" who has been contractually alienated from her first mother so that she can be attached to her second mother.

Isabel contrasts her gotcha day, her second mother's birthday, and the unknowability of her own birthday. Afflicted by this unknowability, the inability to know her birthday instantiates the epistemic ambiguity of transnational adoptee subjectivity produced with intentionally occluded beginnings. In other words, she cannot know because she has been

[138] The narrators adopted from Korea during the 1970s and 1980s told me of how they met their second families for the first time at the arrival gates of U.S. airports, what is referred to as proxy adoptions. See Catherine Choy, *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2013). She explains by-proxy adoptions refer to the delegation, by prospective adoptive parents, of a proxy agent to act in their place to allow them to adopt a child in a foreign court. These adoptions were initially used in the post-World War II context to facilitate transnational adoptions from Germany and Greece but became more prevalent Korea and Japan, particularly after the 1953 Refugee Relief Act, that organized mass adoptions to the United States and other Western countries. In the United States, planeloads of children adopted by proxy were escorted as legal children of their adoptive parents without the endorsement of a social service agency, what many agencies believe were integral to the welfare of the child's placement. Harry Holt was a key figure if mobilizing the proxy method and who largely criticized social agencies and their time-consuming bureaucracy, thus, offered an expedited alternative specifically for "born again" Christians.

made to not know in order to make her adoptable. From this, she is marked as the "best birthday present" on her white adoptive mother's birthday that establish the self and other. Thus, the second mother is able realize her own birthday, an affirmation of the self, through the unequal exchange of gift giving where the adoptee subject is also an object of desire. What becomes a loss for the Asian adoptee is simultaneously a gain for the white mother that preserves the adoptees' disposition of racial melancholia whose loss goes unacknowledged and continually scripted as a gain through the rhetoric of the gift. Nonetheless, the adoptees' second life is entrenched through its orientation to and for the white adoptive mother.

Many of the women described their gotcha days as second birthdays that were celebrated with practices similar to their assumed birthdays including going out and eating cake with their second families. In this sense, the adoptee's gotcha day comes to be the only certifiable moment in their adoption history insofar as their date of birth remains speculative. It is this second life that the affective labor of gratitude is placed upon transnational adoptees for the life that they could not consent to yet are forced to live. The transaction of gratitude, detailed above as performative acts, accentuate the discursive formation of gift giving and free will as a dialectic process of self-making where the will of the "gift child" cannot be not freely given by the child itself. Instead, Asian transnational adoptees are forced to reconcile with their placement into white adoptive families at the expense of the losses they are de-authorized to know. As the instrumentalization of gratitude is incited across asymmetries of power, between white adoptive mother and the adopted Asian girl, the affective labor of the adoptee can be traced within the space of the adoptive family and its fantasies of "white cosmopolitanism."[139]

[139] See Tobias Hubinette and James Arvanitakis, "Transracial Adoption, White Cosmopolitanism and the Fantasy of the Global Family," *Third Text* 26, 6 (2012) doi: 10.1080/09528822.2012.73229.

Always Dying

Isabel and I spent nearly the whole day together where we shared the details of the commonalties, as well as differences, between our adoption histories.

> I just feel like there's a missing part of myself and if I went back there I would have the expectation that it would fill that. And if it didn't, I'd be like, Well, what do I do now?…The agency my mom went through—they did a background check on her, like fingerprinting, and she had to have a letter of reference from the community saying she was like a good citizen and I think that was like the extent of the checking that they did. But you know she turned out to be seriously very physically abusive like beating me as a child. And I think if you're adopted you've already been through so much and then to just get dumped into another traumatizing situation where you're told that this should be your family—this is your home and I don't know—there's something just messed up to that. I know there's so many orphans out there, like people who need homes but—I hate to say it—but sometimes I would wish that I had died—or even live the other life rather than go through some of the things that I did—under my adopted parents.[140]

Isabel wiped her eyes as we continued sitting on her living room carpet and exchanged fantasies of what could have been and who we could have become. Insofar as gotcha day signifies the temporal stage of the adoptees' U.S. subjecthood, then the inception of a second life is preconditioned by the end of the one that lived prior to adoption as the partial death of the child that was left behind. I am not suggesting that the transnational adoptee becomes another child, but rather they are always the life that was made impossible. Therefore, the transnational adoptees' lively death interpellates an ensuing life insofar as it belongs to those who "saved" her as she is not allowed to die before she is reborn into a "second chance at life."

> *Can you tell me what it means to be adopted?*
>
> It is a loss—the potential for family—and a whole life. It's literally a loss of a whole life. And then the expectation to be grateful for this new one that you didn't get to choose. But it's also, at least for me—it's a loss of identity, a loss of culture, a loss of heritage. And it's a loss of self. I don't have an identity at

[140] Isabel Martin, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 23, 2023.

> all. And I think a lot of us are trying to build that for ourselves now—what does it mean to be Asian American?[141]

Isabel, afflicted by the losses of immigration, racialization, and assimilation, speaks to the ontological turmoil of being adopted. She points to how transnational adoption can be apprehended as a "necropolitical" gesture that reveals the contemporary ways in which vulnerable lives of racialized children are conditioned to partially die in order to be permitted to live for those they will belong to.[142] The "subjugation of life to the power of death" is facilitated by the state who simultaneously unmakes and makes the adoptable subject creating the subjectivation as the lives that were made impossible.[143] Through this dialectic of life and death, we can consider how transnational adoption's tale of gaining a "better life" is sanctioned by the loss of one's own (partial) death. For Isabel, the life she didn't get to choose ruptures her sense of self—"I don't have an identity at all"—what Eng describes as a non-physical suicide but a "psychical erasure of one's identity."[144] This effacement of racial identity signifies the arrival of a precarious life—between social and psychic, that leads Isabel to question the meaning ascribed to being Asian American.[145] The seminal line in Freud's essay on "Mourning and Melancholia" describes the melancholic "knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him.[146] Thus, Isabel knows she has lost her first family, but does not know what exactly she has lost in herself as a racial subject.[147]

Isabel's loss of life—partial death of the life that is made impossible—turns us to the ontology of the racial subject as a historical subject wherein Asian transnational adoption

[141] Isabel Martin, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 23, 2023.
[142] See Achille Mbmebe and Steven Corcoran, "Necropolitics" in *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, 2019) https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131298.7.
[143] Membe, "Necropolitics," 92.
[144] Eng, *Racial Melancholia*, 38.
[145] Eng, *Racial Melancholia*, 38.
[146] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey et al., vol. 14 (London: Hogarth, 1957), 245; emphasis in original.
[147] See Eng, *Racial Melancholia*, 79.

emerges under the contours of colonialism and is preserved by global capitalism.[148] Maldanado-Torres denotes the "coloniality of Being" as the fundamental ontology of colonized, racialized subjects in the Latin American context.[149] Crucially, the distinction of colonialism from coloniality articulates the fundamental difference of the former as the political and economic relation wherein the sovereignty of a people or nation lies on the power of another nation from which it is constituted.[150] Coloniality, then, is understood as the enduring patterns of power that emerge from colonialism which define labor, culture, intersubjective relations, and knowledge situated with the particular socio-historical context of the discovery and conquest of the Americas.[151] It is crucial then to place transnational adoption in the United States, as a postcolonial entity, along these patterns of power asymmetries that are intertwined with the historical consolidation of whiteness, respectability, and discourses of civilization elicited under the shadows of colonialism from which contemporary Asian transnational adoption emerges and defines adoptee subjects.[152]

For Maldonado-Torres, the coloniality of Being accentuates how ontological formations of the racialized and colonized are determined by the colonial relations of power—who one is and how one is perceived constitutive of subjectivity. He contends that Manichean misanthropic skepticism, informed by Descartes's ego cogito (I think, therefore, I am), and racism conjoin with ontological exclusion insofar as it is indexed by a particular way of being,

[148] David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (New York: Duke University Press, 2010), 107.
[149] See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being Maldonado-Torres: Contributions to the Development of a Concept," *Cultural Studies* 21, 2–3 (2007): 240-270.
[150] Maldanado-Torres, "On the Coloniality," 243.
[151] Maldanado-Torres, 243.
[152] See David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (New York: Duke University Press, 2010). He outlines a historical sketch of colonialism and transnational adoption that is interwoven with racial politics and nationalist concerns surrounding slavery, manifest destiny, miscegenation, segregation, and integration. Eng explains this history spans from the forced removal of Native American children from reservations to Indian schools to more recent events such as the relocation of Cuban and Vietnamese "orphans" during the upheavals of the Cuban Revolution and the fall of Saigon. See also Linda Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

that of the conquerors.[153] Put otherwise, colonized and racialized peoples are relegated others by the European self wherein they are subjugated as less than human, which lies below Being. This is the disposition of coloniality of Being which entails an encounter with death that is already too late because it is constitutive of its reality as an everyday structure in the company of death.[154] Thus, the partial death—always the life made impossible—of the Asian transnational adoptee animates this ontological formation of sub-Being. Here, the saturation of death gestures towards the production of adoptees' first lives that are calcified in ambiguous fragments. Through the de-authorization to know one's pre-history, the epistemic dilemma of ambiguity gestures towards the sub-ontological difference, or coloniality of Being, of making transnational adoptee subjects. If sub-Being through time is that which is already too late since it is in the company of death then Asian transnational adoptee subjectivity is nowhere in time insofar as the European Daesin cannot recognize the conditions of being by which it is always the life made impossible—the impossible possibility of a racialized subject who is not there.[155] Here, the everyday realities of death's company in the coloniality of Being gestures towards the everyday structure of racial melancholia that elucidates the mundane and troubling crux of Asian transnational adoptee subjectivity. Sanctioned to the power of death of their first lives that precludes the possibility to know that which they have been disallowed to live, the injunction to know oneself through dominant culture's technologies of recognition—the birthday— is foreclosed by the conditions of

[153] Maldanado-Torres, 253.
[154] Maldanado-Torres, 251, 257.
[155] The coloniality of being is a response to Heidegger's fundamental ontology conceptualized through Dasein which translates to "being there." Because Heidegger's task of explicating Dasein as the being who is there, meanings of Being itself leads him to assert that subjectivity is largely shaped by the figure of the One or the They. Therefore, in order for the Dasein to relate authentically to itself, as to evade the call from the They, one must achieve resoluteness that only through the "possibility which is inescapably one's own, that is, death." Heidegger understands death as an individualizing encounter insofar as no one can die for one but that death is a singular factor which separates one from the They. Yet, for Maldonado-Torres death is already always bedside racialized subjects constituted by the forces of coloniality. He draws from Fanon's damné subject to explain, "The damné is for the coloniality of Being what Dasein is for fundamental ontology, but as it were, in reverse. The Damné is for European Dasein the being who is 'not there.'" See Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1991); See also Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962).

epistemic ambiguity across transnational adoption as a contemporary form immigration, organized by processes of racialization and assimilation.

"Adoption is a Good Thing"

Shifting to the space of the white adoptive family, transnational adoption "encrypt[s] public histories of political, economic, and social conflict into the private space of family," most notably emerging during the Cold War.[156] Most of the women I spoke with were adopted from China between the late 1990s to early 2000s during the peak of Chinese transnational adoption in the United States. As Korean transnational adoption began to decrease from 1989, Chinese adoptions would quickly inhabit the forefront of U.S. transnational adoptions as the new leading "sending" country of infants and children to Western countries by the late 1990s.[157] Today, the Chinese girl has become a crystallized figure of transnational adoption in U.S. consciousness, what historian Catherine Choy describes as the "poster child" of arguably contemporary U.S. adoption in general.[158] However, Chinese transnational adoptees in the purview of the U.S. American public are hardly perceived as rescuable orphans in the aftermath of war as in the cases of Japan, Korea, and Vietnam,[159] Instead, Chinese adoptees were envisaged as the means to which certain U.S. citizen-subjects could participate as wordly interventionists in the nationalist project of anticommunism potent in the public imagination following the years after the end of the Cold War.

Upon sharing how my second mother reasoned my own adoption to save me from the Chinese government, Isabel responded:

[156] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 150.
[157] Volkman, "Embodying Chinese Culture," 82.
[158] Choy, *Global Families*, 47.
[159] Choy, *Global Families*, 48-49.

> All these things that adoptive parents tell their kids. It's like we saved you from a life of child sex slavery and poverty and—being grateful and stuff. I think the worst thing my mom said to me was—my mom is very much a heavy conspiracy theorist so she thinks communist China is going to invade America. When I was like eight or nine—it's so bad. My mom would tell me that if they would invade—and if the Chinese communists come to our doorstep—like wanting to rape and kill us—they might see you and spare us.[160]

Through this narrative, the management of Isabel's racial sexual difference by her white mother is situated within a larger U.S. nationalist discourse of anticommunism wherein adoptees become foreign relations that engender channels of intimacy between China and the United States. Thus, white adoptive parents are salient actors in producing racial and political knowledge about and for the other—the transnational adoptee, within the private sphere of the white adoptive family. Chinese adoptees, severed from their pre-histories that are no longer there, become compliant citizen-subjects constituted by the epistemic frames of whiteness. In the above account, the white adoptive mother constructs Isabel as the racialized and politicized means by which the white adoptive family is permitted to live under a putative Chinese invasion. Implied in this narrative is the visual economy of race where differences in physiognomy suggest an authentic bond between the Chinese "invaders" and the Chinese child. Ideas of racial essentialism underwrite this story where the Chinese child becomes the exception to the threat of violence where the adoptee's difference can be extended to protect the white family through kinship ties yet positions her as neither exclusively belonging to the Chinese nor the U.S. nation. Here, racially gendered stories of rescue, salvage, and violence, from white adoptive parents to Chinese adoptees, are necessary epistemic works to a liberal and anticommunist project that regulates adoptees' difference by and for the new global family—an ideal civic institution of the Cold War.

[160] Isabel Martin, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 23, 2023.

The adoptee is touted as a social gain for the U.S. nation-state—as an exemplar entity of democratic altruism—by certain white citizen-subjects who perform acts of "charity" through adoption and even adoptees themselves who identify with the the privileged access to the cultural, social, and political domains of life in the United States. The sentimentalized figure of the child, accorded the sacral value of futurity to the nation, is arranged as an ideal immigrant that poses "neither the economic nor political threat of the adult refugee" or immigrant insofar as the adoptive family controls narratives of adoption, thus, informing the adoptee's ways of knowing itself as a pawn of Cold War politics.[161]

Laura, age forty-six and adopted from Korea, tells me of a conversation she had with her second mother:

> My mom would still always be in the mindset of, adoption was a good thing for us. It was a good thing for her and she was very clear about parenting being a selfish thing. She was not white savior. Thank God, because that's so messed up and I know a lot of people had that. She was like, I wanted to become a parent and I adopted you because parenting is selfish and I wanted to be a mom. And that part was probably like the most honest thing that my mom has ever said, you know? She was like, Parenting is not something that a kid asks for. It's what parents want because they want to be a parent, not because of the kids and what the kids want. And she said, I know I did that and that was really selfish that I wanted to be a parent—but then she was like, but I got what I wanted.[162]

Laura speaks to the transnational adoptee as an autonomous subject who lives the second life not because she has chosen to but because she is left with no other choice but to. Instead, the power to choose to adopt, accorded to certain white middle-class citizen-subjects, compromises the will to live for the Asian child. Judith Butler reminds us that the child is formed through a dependency that "renders the child vulnerable to subordination and exploitation."[163] Thus, the intimate relations between white family and Asian girl organize a

[161] Arissa Oh, "From War Waif to Ideal Immigrant: The Cold War Transformation of the Korean Orphan," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 31, 4 (2012): 42, https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerethnhist.31.4.0034.
[162] Laura Williams, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 9, 2023.
[163] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 7.

disposition of racialized subordination and exploitation of the hidden affective labor and value of the adoptee figure.

It is not that adoption is an isolated event that happens to a child, but an interpellative force that produces subjects as the lives made impossible. Rather, transnational adoptees are constructed and constituted by the collective loss of separation that interpellates the subject through a chasm of succeeding losses—time, genealogical history, and whiteness. It is through white notions of U.S. subjectivity that adoptees' sense of self is ruptured insofar as the ambiguity of their birthdays cannot adhere to the taxonomic gesture to make social life that belongs by birth. Thus, gotcha day takes the place of a second birthday that commemorates the adoptees' impossible life that makes possible its U.S. subjecthood. It is through this frame that one can understand Asian transnational adoption as a pattern of displacement that underlines adoptees' losses of dominant social and cultural ideals of the U.S. nation they find themselves recognized through.

Eng describes the collective mechanisms that effect the occlusion of race occurs across the private realm of family and kinship as the "racialization of intimacy."[164] In the white adoptive family, the exploitation of race consolidates white heteronormative middle-class ideals of family and kinship that reinscribes transnational adoptees into discourse of colorblindness.[165] Through political and cultural processes of anticommunism and U.S. exceptionalism, Asian transnational adoption has become cemented in the national imaginary as an act that transcends race where "race appears as disappearing" within the current putatively "post-racial" moment.[166] Therefore, the white adoptive family constructs the transnational adoptee as similar enough to belong in the family—an occlusion of race—and

[164] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 10.
[165] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 10.
[166] Eng, 117.

simultaneously different enough to be fashioned as an object of desire to make its own. Regnant ideologies of whiteness, heteronormativity, and middle-class values mold transnational adoptees' experiences as a mutual gain for the adoptee and white adoptive family that overwrite its preconditions of loss. This is the disposition of racial melancholia where adoptees are subjected to the everyday injuries of immigration—never being able to fully know the conditions of their migration to the United States—racialization as subjects of difference, and assimilation into the white fabrics of the nation and family.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have sought to articulate the central importance of epistemic losses for transnational adoptees where their pre-histories are co-constructed by state and social welfare actors. Transnational adoptees are foreclosed to the epistemic limits of the lives they have been made to live and shamed into gratitude, an exploitation of the racialized child's dependency in the white adoptive family. With ambiguous pre-histories of the life prior to adoption, transnational adoptee subjectivity is located nowhere in time insofar as the loss of time is ruptured through white notions of social personhood. Conditioned by opaque beginnings, the transnational adoptee is further constructed through loss by and for the white adoptive family that produce them as subjects of differences. Histories of Cold War politics and U.S. American exceptionalism orchestrate the political affairs of rendering adoptees' histories of loss as gains that dominant culture has decidedly sustained threatening to redouble the effects of racial melancholia.

Chapter Two: The Management of Difference: Asian, American, Asian American

Introduction

> If my [second] mom could choose any race, she would want to be Asian. And my mom—deeply feels that I am her child. I think she overcompensates a little bit. She's like, I don't want you to feel like you're not part of this family because you're adopted. She'll say things like, Well I feel in my heart like I biologically carried you… She likes to say, In my heart, I am an Asian woman… She was like, I always forget that you're adopted—she'll say throw away statements like that. She's like, You're practically my blood. She just sort of covers over adoption in that way. So she'll recognize the difference, but then she'll say something that's like—oh that difference doesn't matter or it's so insignificant it doesn't need to be talked about—which was it's really weird because she, again, was the same person who brought up I was Vietnamese and tried to talk about [it] in my younger years.[167]

Claire, age twenty-four and adopted from Vietnam, remarks how her difference as a Vietnamese adoptee was both acknowledged and disavowed by her second mother while growing up. Situated in the realm of the adoptive family, Claire's mother twinges on universalized notions of the heart to appropriate the language of biogenetic reproduction in order to corroborate the kinship relation between white adoptive mother and adopted Asian girl. Thus, the appeal to abstract sameness seeks to absolve Claire's racial difference in an effort to further integrate her into the family that ultimately reifies the premise of difference through acknowledgement only to dismiss its importance. This racial politics of colorblindness is figured through what literary scholar Jodi Melamed describes as "neoliberal multiculturalism," a discursive production that operates to buttress U.S. ascendancy on a global stage through the management of racial contradictions by obscuring the centrality of race, across the national and international domain, in a global capitalist system of exploitation and domination.[168]

[167] Claire Jones, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 22, 2023.
[168] Jodi Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism," *Social Text* 24, 4 (2006): 2.

This chapter discusses the how neoliberal multiculturalism regulates transnationally adopted Asian women's racial contradictions that are coterminous with gender and sexuality across the landscape of whiteness. I begin by presenting a historical overview of neoliberal multiculturalism that gained traction from the 1970s and 1980s which underline our current racial political moment of colorblindness. Shifting to the space of the adoptive family, I contend that difference, racially gendered, is governed by discourses of multiculturalism and colorblindness under U.S. led neoliberalism that render a simultaneous acknowledgement and negation. The following discussion outlines the racial dilemma for transnational adoptees, between the public sphere and the privatized domain of the family, that situate processes of identification across categories of Asian, American, and Asian-American.

Neoliberal Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism, ideologically grounded in U.S. civil rights movements, was established as a federated form in Canada and Australia by the early 1970s and first emerged in U.S. educational policy discourse and grassroots movements in primary and secondary education for community-based racial reconstruction.[169] By the late 1980s, the meaning of the term had broadened significantly, shifting towards a cultural perspective that ignited controversy.[170] Melamed details that for some, multiculturalism signified a rejection of Euro-American norms and a renewed protest against white racism. For centrist and neoconservative critics, it exhibited an assault on U.S. America's shared culture while for progressives it became as a byword that prioritized cultural diversity over substantive political and economic

[169] Christian Joppke and Steven Lukes, "Introduction: Multicultural Questions," in *Multicultural Questions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Christopher Newfield and Avery F. Gordon, "Multiculturalism's Unfinished Business," in *Mapping Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 76–124 in Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism*, (Rutgers University Press, 2016), 98, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1dxg8ct; Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism," 15.
[170] Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism,"15.

objectives.[171] Since the 1990s, multiculturalism has evolved into a policy rubric across business, government, civil society, and education. Its usage to describe movements advocating for justice among historically marginalized groups often modify the term to highlight a notion of "strong" or "transformative multiculturalism."[172] Assimilationist or "weak" multiculturalism then refers to the accommodation of difference while maintaining individualist agendas.[173] Nonetheless, multiculturalism is multivalent, sometimes taking oppositional forms, but perhaps most popularly used for the demand of recognition for minority groups through national ideals such as the melting pot or salad-bowl; or belief in a post-racial world with culture but no race.[174]

From the 1980s, the world historic shift towards neoliberalism is marked by the election of British prime minister Margaret Thatcher and United States president Ronald Reagan characterized by the "reorientation of state activity from the welfare state to supply-side economics, the growing importance of finance capitalism for global capital accumulation, a paradigm shift from state-centered development to free markets and structural adjustment programs, and the movement toward perestroika"—a series of political and economic reforms to the Soviet Union economy that incorporated certain features of free market capitalism.[175] Melamed locates neoliberalism's capacity to deploy multiculturalism across historical forms of U.S. hegemony and transnational capitalist development after World War II to examine how race and capitalism established a shift in U.S. racial epistemology and politics. The postwar period as a "racial break" expounds an "era of overlapping, internationalized anticolonial and civil rights movements that presented significant challenges to the limits of

[171] Melamed, 15.
[172] Melamed, 15.
[173] Ayelet Shachar, "The Paradox of Multicultural Vulnerability: Individual Rights, Individual Groups, and the State," in *Multicultural Questions,* ed. by Christian Joppke and Steven Lukes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) in Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 99.
[174] Joppke and Lukes, "Multicultural Questions;" David R. Roediger, *How Race Survived US History: From the American Revolution to the Present* (New York: Verso, 2008) in Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 99.
[175] Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism", 23n33.

racial democracy of such global magnitude that they produced a permanent crisis in white supremacy."[176] As these movements gained visibility and political power during World War II, Melamed argues they revealed racial contradictions on a global scale that for the first time in such a concerted manner adjoined "U.S. racial and wage slavery to European colonialism," as well as Western and white supremacy.[177] Because the United States and European powers proclaimed their opposition to an antiracist and antifascist war while exercising racism and fascism against people of color in the United States, Europe, and the colonies, these movements condemned Western imperialism and white supremacy on a vast international scale. Amidst the intensifying terms of the ideological Cold War, Melamed continues to describe how the Soviet Union would utilize racism across these contexts as a chief propaganda weapon. Thus, U.S. middle-classes sought to manage these racial contradictions that would go on to function as a vital organizing discourse for U.S. postwar society and global ascendancy.[178] For Melamed, racial liberalism, as a race regime and ideology rather than political philosophy or social movement, acknowledges racial inequality as a problem through a liberal framework of race reform grounded in "abstract equality, market individualism, and inclusive civic nationalism."[179] From this, antiracism is revered as a nationally recognized social value that becomes incorporated into U.S. governmentality.[180] She details:

> At racial liberalism's core was a geopolitical race narrative: African American integration within U.S. society and advancement toward equality defined through a liberal framework of legal rights and inclusive nationalism would establish the moral legitimacy of U.S. global leadership. Evidence that liberal antiracism was taking hold in the United States—civil rights legal victories, black American professional achievement, waning prejudice—was to prove the superiority of American democracy over communist imposition. It would

[176] Howard Winant, *The World Is a Ghetto: Race and Democracy Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 133-36 in Melamed, "The Spirit of Neoliberalism," 1.
[177] Melamed, 4.
[178] Melamed, 2.
[179] Melamed, 2.
[180] Melamed, 2.

> demonstrate to non-Western countries that the social relations of capitalist modernity were not hopelessly compromised by white supremacy.[181]

As capitalism proliferated, its expansion became the "just political response to the Cold War specter of communism" by stitching an "official" antiracism to U.S. nationalism that carries the agency of transnational capitalism.[182] Melamed explicates how liberal racial formations following World War II laid the ideological foundations for the most recent historical phase of neoliberal multiculturalism that continues to buttress U.S. ascendancy as a global power. In an ever-increasing capitalist world that favors the global North over the global South, U.S. multiculturalism becomes the alibi for neoliberal policy that requires the "hyper-extraction of surplus value from racialized bodies."[183] Under its mandates, "racism constantly appears as disappearing…even as it takes on new forms that can signify as nonracial or even antiracist."[184]

Shadowed by U.S-led neoliberalism and a national script of multiculturalism, perhaps the language of choice is of upmost importance in the private domain of family and kinship.[185] Transnational adoption, often conceived as a story of family rather than a narrative of immigration, is a significant conduit of colorblindness where race is subsumed into the intimate private sphere. Moreover, Asian transnational adoption effectuates the privatization of race insofar as white neoliberal subjects exercise consumer choice of bodies of color through private interests and prejudices of purchasing power without necessarily having to concern themselves with the historical continuum of systemic racisms and patriarchies—domestic and international.[186] Leveraging the private realm to secure the "free" market,

[181] Melamed, 4-5
[182] David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (New York: Duke University Press, 2010), 200n23; See also Melamed, "*The Spirit of Neoliberalism*," 5.
[183] Melamed, 1, 3.
[184] Melamed, 3.
[185] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 9.
[186] Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 98.

transnational adoption appeals to neoliberal freedom and racial progress of consumer choice that sanctions the exploitation and obstruction of race to fortify idealized notions of family in the global North.

Asian Difference

> I don't know if it's better or worse that she [second mother] says, I wish I was Asian instead of saying I wish you were white. I think that's really interesting. She'll say things like, Oh Claire, Asian women are beautiful—and I'm like okay we're getting into some hairy stuff there… She's saying that if she got to choose her race she would choose Asian because she's like, Asian women are beautiful and this that and the other—I love Asian people. My mom does have a weird affinity for Asian things. It's the same for Asian culture—kinda—I mean she's not well versed in Asian culture or anything but she does have this weird admiration for it. I think I've told you this before—she wants me to have an Asian husband so we can have purebred Asian children—so I think that tells you everything you need to know about all that. I think she thinks that if she was Asian, yes we would relate to each other more, or being an Asian woman is a walk in the park—Oh you're beautiful and it's awesome, like why wouldn't anyone be an Asian woman? I think that's why she says that.[187]

Claire and I first crossed paths in our undergrad where we would come to find out that both her and I are transnational adoptees. Loss, kinship and family, race and gender quickly became what seemed like our go-to conversation topics, carried over in paragraphs of back-and-forth texting and exchanged in passing, that continue to shape a vulnerable friendship across our lived experiences. The oral history sessions with Claire are thus parts of our re-occurring conversations over the past couple of years, one of them being the entwinement of race, gender, and sexuality. In the above narrative, we see the management of race through her mother's idealization of Asian women that veers close to the point of identification. Thus, her desire to be Asian rather than to wish Claire was white points to how abstract sameness is established through the contours of racialized sexuality ascribed to Asian women.

[187] Claire Jones, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 22, 2023.

Processes of racialization, inherently sexualized, render Asian women as exotically passive others animating the Orientalist chic of heteropatriarchal desire within U.S. dominant culture. Galvanized through colonial histories of military prostitution and war, the gendered commodification of Asian women, notably for white, Western male consumption, can be marked through histories of mail-order brides, "comfort" women, war brides, and other sex workers.[188] Thus, fabrications of erotic docility propound Asian women to embody excessive sensuality and unconditional will against white conventions of femininity.[189] Moreover, Asian female sexuality is bound to the straitjacket of an insatiable femininity characterized through channels of hyper-sexualization and hyper-feminization, on account of race and gender, that function to substantiate the rationale of pleasure and consumption.

Transnational adoption can be understood as a more recent embodiment of gendered and sexual commodification entrenched in legacies of sexual relations under colonialism that are maintained through the international division of labor of global capitalism.[190] From this perspective, the adopted Asian girl is oriented towards the white, androcentric institution of the adoptive family that accentuates how historical continuums of racialized sexuality incarnate new Asian female subjectivities to consolidate the affective terrain of the white heteronormative middle-class family. In the context of contemporary transnational adoption between China and the United States, a "flexible Asian difference" endorses the successful integration of Asian girls in white American families contrasted against a "less assimilable"

[188] See Sunny Woan, "White Sexual Imperialism: A Theory of Asian Feminist Jurisprudence," *Wash. & Lee J. Civ. Rts. & Soc. Just.*14, 2 (2008): 275-301; Cynthia H. Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Rosalind Chou, *Asian American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality,* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012); Kerry Abrams, "Polygamy, Prostitution, and the Federalization of Immigration Law," *Columbia Law Review* 105, 3 (2005): 641-716.
[189] Celine Shimizu, "Queens of Anal, Double, Triple, and the Gangbang: Producing Asian/American Feminism in Pornography, 1940s–1990s" in *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (New York: Duke University Press, 2007), 143.
[190] Eng, 105.

black difference.[191] The contentious debate surrounding transracial (domestic) adoption and race matching has been long-standing often in reference to an 1972 statement issued by The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) which took a "vehement stand against the placement of black children in white homes for any reason" and advocated that only Black families be permitted to adopt Black children.[192] Here, Lovelock suggests that this stance and their claims of cultural genocide may have propelled white humanitarianism abroad and aligned with white segregationist agendas.[193] As race became an increasing issue in domestic adoption, such was not the case of transnational placements from Asia.

[191] Sara Dorow, *Transnational Adoption: A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship* (NYU Press: 2006), 42.

[192] National Association of Black Social Workers, "Preserving Families of African Ancestry," Position Paper (1972), http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/nabsw.org/resource/collection/ 0D2D2404–77EB-49B5–962E-7E6FADBF3D0D/Preserving_Families_of_African _Ancestry.pdf in Catherine Choy, *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 126; Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 96.

[193] Kirsten Lovelock, "Intercountry Adoption as a Migratory Practice: A Comparative Analysis of Intercountry Adoption and Immigration Policy and Practice in the United States, Canada and New Zealand in the Post W.W. II Period," *International Migration Review* 34, 3 (2000): 907–49. Eng explains how declining birth rates in the postwar period, greater access to abortion and contraceptive methods, and the easing stigma surrounding women bearing children outside of marriage have lent to fewer white children in the domestic adoption system. Thus, the hesitation to adopt Black children by white parents, potentially due to fear of custody battles with first mothers as the legal paradigms of domestic adoption are often not plenary as in transnational adoption, have relied on transnational adoption as an alternative form of reproduction to harbor ideals of family. See Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 108. See also Ana Teresa Ortiz and Laura Briggs, "The Culture of Poverty, Crack Babies, and Welfare Cheats," *Social Text* 24, 3 (2003): 126-66 for a comparative race analysis across the domestic and transnational adoption markets. They detail the privileged consumptive choices of white heterosexual families and vilification of single black "welfare" mothers who were pathologized for giving birth to "crack babies" by the mid-1990s to help promote domestic adoption that uphold the ideal white family and hardly "redeemable" Black children. Transnational adoption then produces children with a difference that "makes them both rescuable and valuable" premised on the idea they are "innocent victims of 'unpromising infrastructural soil' rather than fixed to [racially] abject[ed] mothers and cultures." Sara Dorow builds off Laura Briggs to outline this "complex interplay of interior and external racial categories joins family and nation in what Briggs calls 'a coherent cultural logic that invest[s] the foreign in the domestic and the domestic in the foreign.'" See Sara Dorow, *Transnational* Adoption: *A Cultural Economy of Race, Gender, and Kinship*, 54. See also Laura Briggs, "Mother, Child, Race, Nation: The Visual Iconography of Rescue and the Politics of Transnational and Transracial Adoption," *Gender & History* 15, 2 (2003): 181. The power of an imagined flexible difference of Asian girls has fortified transnational adoption to the extent that domestic adoption, namely of African American and Native American children, is often not ever considered by white adopters. For a historical analysis of domestic adoption in the U.S. see Ellen Herman, "The Difference Difference Makes," in *Kinship by Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 229–252. See also the topics of "African-American Adoptions," "Indian Adoption Project," "Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA)," and "Transracial Adoptions," in Herman, "The Adoption History Project," available at http://pages.uoregon.edu/adoption/topics/index.html. The passage of the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act established legal barriers to the adoption of American Indian and Alaska Native children by U.S. citizens without tribal affiliation—a result of the century long history of Native American child displacement through state-funded boarding schools first operating from 1860. While many schools began shutting down toward the end of the 1950s, the 1958 Indian Adoption Program would prosper through the 1960s that further removed children

Unlike the narrative of Claire, most of the women I spoke with described the near or complete absence of dialogue surrounding race and adoption that still reveals how the discourse of colorblindness employs a depoliticized language of neoliberal multiculturalism in the realm of the white adoptive family. For Korean adoptee, Rachel, age fifty-one, neither of her second parents spoke of race, Korean culture, or adoption with her. After asking how this influenced the way she saw herself, she utters, "I felt like I needed to be like them—I felt like I had that need to be white." Explaining how the times when she tried to speak of such matters with her second family were ridiculed and tainted, Rachel continues:

> I feel like it's limited how much I can like really talk to her [second mother] about it because she gets upset. And I know she feels guilty about not understanding what that meant in terms of being the only one who was Korean…I was so much trying to fit in—that that made me not fit in. So anything related to that [Asian] or even—looking or feeling like that—I was just rejecting it, which of course was rejecting that part of me.[194]

The white silence that traces the affective contours of the family functions to privatize the global inequalities of transnational adoption—reproductive choices, distribution of reproductive labor, economies of race and gender. Therefore, Rachel's second mother's emotive force of guilt overwrites possibility for dialogue energizing Rachel to assimilate towards the whiteness of her second family. In this sense, affect becomes performative that works to interpellate the transnational adoptee subject through the imperative to repetitively enact whiteness. Here, the whiteness of silence is productive insofar as it conditions the adoptee's shifting racial identifications that operate within the regnant discourse of colorblindness. The affective labor of the transnational adoptee is already racialized that requires a dismissal of the racialized self in order to configure the affective contours of the

from sixteen western U.S. states into primarily white families along the east coast and throughout the Midwest. Many tribes marked Native American transracial adoption as cultural imperialism given the sovereignty of Native American tribes as nations, where such acts can be understood as both domestic and international adoption.

[194] Rachel Anderson, virtual interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 24, 2023.

white, heteronormative middle-class nuclear family "through the child's completion of its sanctioned ideals."[195] José Esteban Muñoz reminds us that subjects who seek to identify with and assimilate to dominant ideologies are tasked with the contradictory toll that is: "to find self within the dominant public sphere, we need to deny self."[196] Therefore, transnational adoption allows us to reconsider how to find self within the private space of the white family, the adoptee must deny the racialized self.

Asian American

> I was really dissatisfied with how I felt about myself. I didn't really know where I fit with everything. I mean, of course, I had Asian friends in high school and they said things like, Oh, you're not really Asian—all this stuff and that was hard. And trying to talk to that with my [second] mom—she just couldn't understand why that bothered me so much because she was just like, Well, you're not in some sense—you're not. My mom talked to me recently and she was like, Oh, Claire you can't go back to Vietnam. They'll clock you as an American right away—they're going to know—You couldn't even cross the street—you have no idea how to navigate Vietnam. She's laughing about this, and part of me is like—well, whose fault is that?… And she is like, No, my daughter is Asian, but not that Asian. She's American. She's my child. She's this, this and this—as though that was going to cover the sadness and the trauma I felt.[197]

Evidenced in Claire's narrative are the painful implications of colorblind racial politics that pervade the domestic sphere. The lost ideals of Asianness, a coordinate of racial melancholia, goes unrecognized by her Asian peers and is reinforced by Claire's second mother where the acknowledgement of difference serves only to dismiss its importance. This instance of neoliberal multiculturalism, in the context of the white adoptive family, legitimates Claire's Asian difference as it obfuscates. That is, her second mother places Claire as simultaneously American, Asian, and "not that Asian" that animates how adoption

[195] Eng, 109.
[196] José Esteban Muñoz, "The White to Be Angry: Vaginal Davis's Terrorist Drag," *Social Text* 52, 53 (1997): 81 https://doi.org/10.2307/466735.
[197] Claire Jones, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 22, 2023.

collapses difference to consolidate the affective relations between white mother and Asian daughter.

Alexa shared a similar sentiment surrounding her experiences of racialization as a transnational adoptee.

> White Americans would be like, Oh, you're Asian, you don't fit in here. And then Asian Americans would be like, You weren't raised in an Asian community, you don't fit in here…It's hurtful to feel like you don't fit in anywhere based off of things you can't help. You can't help that you're adopted.[198]

Echoed by Alexa is a racial predicament expressed by many of the other narrators. Afflicted by the affective task of orienting her racialized self, Alexa animates how the processes of racialization confer a double abjection from the dominant culture of whiteness, as well as ideals of Asianness. She reminds us of the involuntary immigration passage of transnational adoption that subjectivizes her through the procedures of racialization in the United States where she is negated against ideals of whiteness and Asianness. Thus, both Claire and Alexa gesture towards the absence of agency in transnational adoption's interpellative force that distance them from the larger Asian community, the white families they are placed into, and a part of themselves that goes unrecognized.

The narratives of the adoptees I spoke with were formed by the contours of dominant culture that often entailed vexed identifications with identitarian paradigms of race that require knowable coherent subjects to stabilize notions of identity—Asian, Asian American, white. Each of the women I spoke with recounted nuanced, often taxing, and shifting identifications that arranged the dynamic processes of being in the world. Laura, age forty-six and adopted from Korea, grew up in a white rural town in the Midwest where she knew of

[198] Alexa Leighton, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 27, 2023.

only two other Asian women nearby, a Korean woman married to an American GI and a mail-order bride living in the next town over. Laura and her sister, also adopted from Korea, were the only Asian children in her hometown. As we came to discuss racial identity, she recalled how she once negotiated between multiple identifiers that carry different meanings for her today:

> I think I say Asian American more than Korean American but Korean probably the most. But I know when I was younger, I did not think Korean American fit for me because I felt like anybody that had their ethnicity with American behind them signified their struggle in earning it, as an immigrant…I felt like that to me had a connotation with immigrant struggle. And even though we are immigrants, I felt like it was very different than the refugee story immigrant struggle or somebody learning a second language at 14 immigrant struggle. I recognize that I had a lot of privilege that was different than a lot of other immigrants… When I was younger, I didn't have that same struggle—I had white parents that at that point afforded me a lot of privilege. So I felt like it wasn't really right for me to claim that. It wasn't really fair for me, but now I feel like I've had enough struggle.[199]

Laura articulates the plight of "earning" American as a hyphenated identifier—the reiterated loss of dominant ideals—that was once incommensurate with the acknowledgement of her comparatively privileged form of immigration. The Asian American cultural politics that are often negotiated as intergenerational and intersubjective phenomena for immigrant families enable us to think about how this endeavor is recognized as the "immigrant struggle" Laura distances herself from.[200] The dominant conception of Asian American as immigrants, who become naturalized U.S. citizens, and their progeny accorded with birthright citizenship, peripheralize other patterns of immigration, such as adoption, that alter processes of racialization and identification. Yet, the cost of identifying with this hyphenated subjectivity

[199] Laura Williams, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 9, 2023; Laura Williams, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 30, 2023.
[200] See Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 121.

concerns a "series of failed and unresolved integrations" to that which seeks to taxonomize racial subjects.[201]

The notion of "enough struggle" to claim this fragmented subjectivity elucidates how American is achieved through Korean that, for Laura, has been met. The emergence of the Asian American category can be situated in the aftermath of the civil rights and antiwar movement of the 1960s as a collective formed through activist struggle and histories of migration from East, Southeast, and South Asia to the United States.[202] Since the 1970s, the term has been institutionalized through academic discourse most notably through field of Asian American studies that geographically centered California as its historical site of inquiry.[203] Erika Lee explains that Asian American ethnic identity has been formed by not only experiences of migration to the United States, but has also been intricately tied to experiences of racial discrimination and the international position of their homelands regarding the U.S.[204] As a racial monolith, the diverse origins of Asian immigrants has subsumed disparate histories of exclusion and entry, national identity, race, and international security.[205] Since the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Hart-Cellar Act), Asian immigration has grown exponentially and academic insights of contemporary immigration patterns and immigrant life continue to emerge through phenomena and concepts of transnationalism, globalization, diaspora, dual citizenship, "illegal" immigration regimes, and incarceration and deportation.[206] Yet, the conventional usage of Asian American refers to first-generation immigrant parents and their descendants that Asian transnational adoptees

[201] David Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (New York: Duke University Press, 2019), 35.
[202] Sunmin Kim, "Fault Lines Among Asian Americans: Convergence and Divergence in Policy Opinion." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 7, 2 (2021): 47 muse.jhu.edu/article/794145.
[203] Mae Ngai, "Asian American History: Reflections on the De-Centering of the Field," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25, 4 (2006): 98, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27501746.
[204] Erika Lee, "A Part and Apart: Asian American and Immigration History," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 34, 4 (2015): 36, https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerethnhist.34.4.0028.
[205] Lee, 36.
[206] Lee, 33.

find themselves excluded from. Laura recounted the initial excitement of attending college and being around other Asian students for the first time that became quickly stifled once she arrived on campus.

> I started learning more about Korean culture and I had some achy parts with it in my first year of college. There were some Korean international students who were really nice to me and then when they found out I was adopted, they were like, Oh, you're not really Korean—and they had said that to other people in front of me. I was really hurt. Somebody had said, Oh, are you going to that Asian American study thing? And I was like, Yeah, maybe—and somebody was like, She's adopted, you know… Somebody asked me something in a computer lab and I was like, I'm sorry, I don't speak Korean—she's speaking Korean to me—and this other girl that I didn't know leaned back and was like, She's adopted. So that was really hard—so I didn't befriend Koreans.[207]

Certain streams of immigration recognize certain struggles as struggles. Laura's adoptedness barred her from the larger Korean and Asian American communities that in turn hindered her recognition of her own struggles with processes of immigration, racialization, and assimilation as a transnational adoptee. Static notions of Asian American function to reproduce certain ideals of Asianness and whiteness that transnational adoptee subjectivity challenges. With particular attention to this contemporary form of immigration through the intimate sphere, we might ask, is the transnational adoptee a non-naturalized first-generation immigrant?

Racially Marked

Early on in my discussions with Natalie, age twenty-two and Chinese adoptee, she recounted how her relation to Chinese culture began with a sense of apathy leading her to not take up her second parents' invitation to learn mandarin. With age, she described a greater, yet

[207] Laura Williams, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 9, 2023.

conflicted, interest in learning about Chinese culture that to this day remains stifled, troubling her racial identity.

> I don't even know how much of this I can claim. I don't know how much of this I should feel like this is me because up until this point—I haven't really cared and—my parents are white so I wasn't in this culture…Everyone's experience is obviously different, but for me—it's kind of like—okay so you look Chinese on the outside and you were born there—you have a Chinese name, but culturally—I did not grow up in that…When Covid really hit and Trump tweeted the thing that he did, I didn't know how to feel because it was very upsetting. I was like, what the heck—why would you do that? Do you not realize the chain of events that will ensue because you said this? Like this could impact people like me, but then I was like—you know, I had to take a step back. I was like, well—they are me, but—they're not me… Let's say I go somewhere and there are more hate crimes against Asian people. I could be just as much a subject to that as someone who did grow up in that culture. So in that way, I'm like— yeah, this is part of me, but at the same time, like to speak on the experience of what it feels like to be in that community, surrounded by that community, and then kind of be a part of the in-group, I can't really speak on that…And so it feels weird to claim that identity. And then it's like, where does that put you? I genuinely don't know—I am someone with an Asian face, but have grown up with American and white people values, as weird as that sounds.[208]

The disjuncture between American cultural values, underwritten by ideals of whiteness, and her body racialized as Asian reveals an alternate way of being and becoming a racial subject in the world. For Natalie, U.S president Donald Trump's incendiary rhetoric of the "Chinese virus," later echoed as the "kung flu" at multiple campaign rallies, amid the unprecedented global pandemic implicates people like her— other Chinese subjects—yet elicits a vexed identification with Chineseness. Confronted by the threat of public and political violence that marks her through the visual economy of race and coupled by the dominant notion of race as culture, Natalie's vexed racial identification with Chineseness and whiteness inform a state of ontological uncertainty. Literary scholar Samira Kawash reminds us:

> The modern conception of racial identity maintains an uneasy relation to the visual; the visible marks of the racialized body are only signs of a deeper, interior difference, and yet those visible marks are the only differences that can be observed. The body is the sign of a difference that exceeds the body. The modern

[208] Natalie Scott, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, June 22, 2023.

> concept of race is therefore predicated on an epistemology of visibility, but the visible becomes an insufficient guarantee of knowledge. As a result the possibility of a gap opens up between what the body says and what the body means.[209]

Crucially, this cleavage between what the body says and what the body means points to the productive tensions of racial discourse that slip between the somatic, visuality, and interior essence where race is the means by which the visible and invisible are intimately linked.[210] Moreover, race as biology and race as culture, suture somatic differences, registered through the visible, to putatively innate physical and mental characteristics.[211] It is through the visible that Natalie's "Asian face" is seemingly contradicted by the normative conception of race as culture where visiblized Asian difference must be authenticated by the invisible knowledge of Asian culture, her Chinese culture, which functions as a naturalization of race. The space between what the body says—"you look Chinese on the outside"— and what the body means, as the uncertainty of how and to what extent Natalie claims a Chinese identity, shifts our attention to processes of identification between the white home and the white world within the putatively colorblind age.

Specular Images

> It's one thing, 'cause we can't really see ourselves unless we look at a picture or look in the mirror. And that's still not the same as having somebody else look at you. So I seriously just perceived myself basically as white.[212]

Isabel's reference to the mirror and identification as white resounded through the narratives of other adoptees I spoke with, as well as myself. During the last semester of my undergrad before moving abroad for graduate school, I passed a mirror that hung on my

[209] Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 130.
[210] Wendy Chun, "Introduction: Race and/as Technology," *Camera Obscura 24*, 1, 70 (2009): 11, 15.
[211] Chun, 11.
[212] Isabel Martin, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 23, 2023.

bedroom wall. I stood in front of the image that confronted me and had never seen myself as I did then. Several minutes passed and my feet remained pointed forwards as I asked myself: Am I Asian? and subsequently—Am I not white? In the following months, several encounters with other Asian transnational adoptees articulated similar experiences of inquiry that began with the mirror and upon my graduate work I have observed is a well-documented experience in existing scholarship on transnational adoptee subjectivity, particularly across postcolonial and cultural studies.

I turn to Franz Fanon's adaptation of Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage," often referred to as the racialized mirror stage in Fanon's discussion of Antillean children and construction of the self, to configure the adoptee self. The mirror stage concerns identification that speaks to Lacan's other psychoanalytic concepts of the self and other, the ego and Subject, and realms of existence. It should be noted that Lacan's work is distinct from the psychoanalytic writers that precede him—Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Melanie Klein—who are primarily concerned with theorizing the human psyche. Lacan, a notable figure in structuralist movement of the 1950s and 1960s, developed psychoanalytic theories that combined Freudian psychoanalysis with key elements of structuralism that have landed far beyond the discipline of psychology and into other areas of study. Feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz firmly acknowledges:

> Lacan has succeeded, where many before him failed, in signaling the importance of Freud's work to disciplines outside of psychology (narrowly conceived), making it relevant to all the social sciences and humanities which take subjectivity as their object of investigation (including linguistics, literary theory, philosophy, politics, semiotics, social theory, and anthropology, as well as feminism).[213]

[213] Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (Routledge, 2003), 9.

Before discussing Fanon's response to the mirror stage, let me first provide an overview of the concept. The mirror stage explicates a structure of subjectivity rather than a literal isolated moment of human development. Thus, the experience of looking into the mirror is exemplary of subject formation but not a sole cause. This phase expounds a process by which one understands itself as an individual marking the first time the child thinks of itself as "I" in relationship with the reflected image that it takes on.[214] Insofar as the mirror stage describes identification, it is also about alienation because to be a subject is to imagine yourself as more of yourself. Before the mirror stage, the child understands itself only in discombobulated fragments until looking in the mirror can they first recognize themselves as a coherent I that underpins their construction of the core sense of self (the ego and Subject) as they exist within those registers. The mirror stage invokes a misunderstanding (méconnaissance): the image is me and simultaneously not me, that requires them to see themselves from the outside as an out-of-body experience.[215] Through this, the ego and Subject are formed that give way to the promise of wholeness allowing the child to see a coherent specular image. For Lacan, the mirror stage achieves the child's entrance into the Imaginary and Symbolic realms of existence that construct the self as the ego and the Subject, respectively. The Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic are three registers of existence based on Saussure's semiology by which the mirror stage is positioned across. The Real is beyond signification and what one imagines as existing thus evades the task of conceptualization. One is closest to the Real after first being born, unaffected by language and culture, until the occurrence of the mirror stage. As the child enters the Symbolic, they become a Subject as they are positioned in the larger symbolic structures of language, social relations, signifiers,

[214] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English* trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2006), 75.
[215] Paige Allen, "What is Lacan's Mirror Stage?" Perlego, accessed August 10, 2023, https://www.perlego.com/knowledge/study-guides/what-is-lacans-mirror-stage/.

culture, and norms, as well as the Imaginary that form the ego (self-consciousness and identity as an image seen by others).[216]

Fanon's extensive footnote in *Black Skin, White Masks* explicates the fundamental differences of the mirror stage for the white child and the Black child because of how there is subjectivation is structured.[217] He expounds that the idea of the human as white is constructed through the images of the non-white colonial other as non-white. Thus, when the Black child looks in the mirror, they see a white child; and as the white child looks in the mirror, they see a child that is not Black. Whiteness for the white child explicates the privilege of not being marked—I am white because I am not black—that is not available for Black child who does not have an alternative subject position to occupy. To be a human being is to have a sense of self—this is me, I am this—that colonial violence appropriates as Western white subjectivity. Therefore, the Black child who sees the image of a white child explicates the demand of subject formation wherein they must see themselves as white because in a white discourse of racial subjectivity Black is not human. For Fanon, when the Black child looks into the mirror, instead of seeing a whole self, they are further fragmented because the specular image is subjected to the racist gaze in the white mirror.[218] For the white child, the "European notion of alienation inherent in subjectivity" is of a particular kind of luxury that reassures the Subject and leads to a sense of agency in the world that is not accorded to the Black child whose subject formation is hindered by the injuries of colonialism.[219] Therefore, the Black child experiences a double alienation because the reflection is not the image seen by themself but

[216] Allen, "What is Lacan's."
[217] See Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* (London: Pluto, 2008), 124-126n25.
[218] See Stephen Frosh, "Psychoanalysis, Colonialism, Racism," *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology 33* (3), (2013): 141-154.
[219] Frosh, 150.

an image of the colonizer's gaze that further fragments their subject formation and estranged to the possible space of meaning-making in the world.[220]

The structure of Asianness is not black, yet it can never be white insofar as the triangulation of U.S. race relations constructs Asian Americans through the model minority discourse. I want to suggest that for the Asian transnational adoptee, the racialized mirror stage departs from Fanon because of its occurrence from the intimate space of the white family and into the external world that is also white. Otherwise said, it is not just that the Asian adoptee looks in the mirror and sees a white child but that this mirror phase is extended across the time that they leave the space of the white home. As the narrators detailed their white identifications, their reflections of the past self underlined the ongoing process of identification where most of them today identify as Asian, in disparate ways. The mirror stage does not require an actual mirror because it entails recognizing oneself through the other's perception. Therefore, the adoptee who sees themself as white animates a space of intimate belonging inculcated to whiteness by white parents who look at them as their own child, where racial difference is dissipated. Regardless of the extent to which the adoptee's difference is acknowledged by the white parents, the premise of adopting an Asian child into the white family is framed as: *You are not different enough, or this difference is not significant enough, for you to be my child.* Narratives of colorblind love function to justify transnational adoption as an act that transcends biogenetic kinship, hence, often marks white adopters as anti-racist or non-racist. It is this logic that sanctions the integration of the Asian child into the white family where difference is produced and simultaneously dissolved. Because the adoptee's difference goes unacknowledged by those most affectively immediate to her, seeing herself through the gaze of her white parents enables a form of recognition, albeit fragmented, where she takes on a white image, a white identity. Caroline, age forty and

[220] Frosh, 150.

adopted from Korea, told me how she always felt white growing up at the same time she endured racist experiences growing up.

> There were a lot of kids pulling back their eyes and saying I have a flat face, a flat nose. Why I have chinky eyes and making up a language to mock me. And kids saying, Why don't you look like your parents? A lot of microaggressions, but a lot of direct racism and a lot of questions that I didn't have answers to. I think that's what made me feel so defensive was I didn't have answers. I don't know why I don't look like my parents. I don't know what my parents look like.[221]

It is because Caroline remains tightly woven into the white family as a child that racist encounters in the outside world led her to still apprehend herself as white. Estranged from her first parents and subjected to the white family, Caroline's experiences as being racially marked recast the epistemic losses of those she has never known. In the private realm, familial love overwrites her Asian difference as if she were their very own, mirroring biological kinship, yet as Kim Park Nelson notes goes unacknowledged as a grievance for the adoptee.[222]

As adoptees shift away from the white home and into the public sphere others will view them as people who do not belong to them because of racism. Thus, adoptees see themselves through the gaze of others in the public sphere that marks an Asian otherness which is structured differently from the gaze of their white parents in the domestic space. Upon leaving the white home and looking into the figurative mirror, they see the difference of their racialized body that they feel estranged from. For some, this process of identification, recognizing their white identities against their Asian bodies, took place during their early twenties as college students and for others later in their lives throughout their thirties and forties. The mirror stage for transnational adoptees encapsulates a thrust into the outside world from the white home that often incites a sense of turmoil and further fragmentation: Am I

[221] Caroline Myers, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 5, 2023.
[222] Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 67.

Asian? Am I white? Moreover, the racialized mirror stage for transnational adoptees occurs across the private and public domain where the contexts of whiteness construct the Asian adoptee body differently: *In the white home, I am white because I recognize myself as my parent's child. In the white world, I am Asian because I see myself as abjected from dominant culture.* I am not suggesting that mirror stage for adoptees is only a site of further fragmentation; it also carries the capacity for meaning making across ideals of Asianness and whiteness, between body and world, the self and the social.

Conclusion

Let me return to the frame of racial melancholia for Asian transnational adoptee subjectivity as an intrasubjective disposition where losses through procedures of racialization, assimilation, and immigration are obliged to be negotiated in isolation. Unlike the communal nature of racial melancholia for first and second-generation Asian Americans, this engagement is lost for the transnational adoptee that constitute the disposition of racial melancholia as an instrasubjective affair of "inexorable singularity."[223] Distinctly, racial melancholia for non-adopted Asian Americans concerns issues stemming from Asian American immigration that are largely viewed as intergenerational conflicts between parents and children. Eng explains how this framing regards social issues—for instance, institutional racism and economic exploitation, as conflicts between first-generation parents and their second-generation children that threatens to dislodge such struggles away the public sphere to be secluded in the private domain of family.[224] Here, issues emerging from histories of immigration are often shaped as master narratives of intergenerational cultural conflict bound to the private realm that efface public histories and conflicts from proper political address.[225]

[223] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 122.
[224] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 63 in Eng, 121.
[225] Eng, 121.

Therefore, unlike in Asian American immigrant families where such struggles are often collectively negotiated, transnational adoptees experience their racial melancholia alone whose losses often go unacknowledged and unaffirmed by those most affectively immediate to them.[226]

The narrative accounts throughout this chapter on how difference is managed in the family and the public sphere, identification, and the body are largely processes that are negotiated in isolation, thus risking redoubling the effects of racial melancholia. Indexed by the epistemic ambiguities of personal adoption histories, transnational adoptees' difference is both produced and denied by their white parents that foreground further encounters of fragmentation as they attempt to reconcile their white identities with their Asian bodies across various contexts with Asians, whites, and Asian Americans. I have outlined the contemporary landscape of neoliberal multiculturalism within the private domain that regulates Asian transnational adoptees' difference to consolidate the affective confines of the white heteronormative middle-class family. Further, I have discussed how this underwrites adoptees' identifications with ideals of whiteness and Asianness that are further complicated through the normative category of Asian American. Further, my attempt to explicate the prevalence of white identifications among Asian transnational adoptees gestures towards a dialectic of recognition across the domains of the public and private through a racialized mirror stage by which subjects are formed through the perception of others that accentuate the disposition of racial melancholia through processes of racialization.

[226] Eng, 121.

Chapter Three: Racial and Sexual Exceptionalism: The Adopted Sexual Model Minority

> I do hear that, particularly from black creators talking about, oh, but Asian people, they aren't under the threat of violence the same way black bodies are, this, this, and this. And I definitely acknowledge that on the average—[in] my daily life—I definitely don't feel probably the same way a black American walks on the street. But I also wish I could counter and just—not like it's the Oppression Olympics, but harm does happen to Asian bodies. Overseas and here, we just, A, either don't talk about it or, B, we don't recognize it as violence.[227]

Introduction

Claire, a Vietnamese adoptee aged twenty-four, gestures towards the contemporary political climate of race and racialization within the United States. That is, how Asian Americans are triangulated through the domestic landscape of black-white race relations largely articulated through the model minority discourse that functions to buttress elusive fictions of racial exceptionalism. Established in the postwar period after legalized exclusion was lifted, Asian American model minority discourse emerged in the wake of U.S. civil rights movements, the Cold War conflict, and reformation of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.[228] Amidst this period of immigrants and refugees from Asia, the model minority stereotype worked to distinguish "good' Asian capitalists from 'bad' Asian communist subjects."[229] This stereotype purports the academic intelligence, economic achievement, and upward mobility of Asian Americans that wields an "alibi for and buffer between white privilege and black disenfranchisement."[230] Posited against African Americans and other racially marginalized groups, this process of racialization venerates Asian Americans as a "counterexample to politically active African Americans" that declare Asian Americans as

[227] Claire Jones, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, September 2, 2023.
[228] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (New York: Duke University Press, 2019), 40.
[229] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 115.
[230] Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia*, 40, 115.

apolitical, socially passive, and hard-working.[231] The national ethos of the American Dream underwrites this configuration whereby the liberal subject pulls itself up from their bootstraps and thus can attain economic success in the land of equal opportunity and freedom. [232] Thus, the orchestration of racial antagonisms, particularly between Asian Americans and African Americans, serves to reify white frames of success and upward mobility that buttress U.S.-led capitalism and whiteness.

Asian American subjectivity is accorded the contradiction of perpetual foreigners and model minorities wherein both prescriptions function to legitimate each other. Asian Americans are simultaneously venerated as superior to African Americans—often marked as honorary, adjacent, or surrogate whites—while obscured as outside, hence eccentric, to the nation. Importantly, this process of racialization through axes of racial valorization and civic ostracism is galvanized through anti-blackness that operates to consolidate whiteness. Histories of solidarity and collective action between Asian and Black communities have persevered from the era of Asian exclusion (1875-1943), the 1920s labor union movement, Civil Rights Movement in the late 1960s, as well as the Asian American Movement and Black Power Movement (late 1960s to mid-1970s).[233] Yet, insofar as racial stratifications establish Asian, Asian American, Black, and African American communities and histories through antagonistic tendencies such collective gestures remained occluded from public racial discourse.

[231] Sumi K.Cho, "Converging Stereotypes in Racialized Sexual Harassment: Where the Model Minority Meets Suzie Wong," *Gender Race and Justice* 1 (1997): 185.
[232] Eng mentions it is also worth noting how "the model minority stereotype dovetails with a Confucian tradition of filial piety in East Asian societies. This tradition mandates a strict hierarchical relationship between individual family members, and between individual family units and the political representatives of the state." See David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (New York: Duke University Press, 2010), 190n42.
[233] See Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1994).

Putatively positive connotations of the model minority trope further implicate the fading histories of Asian exclusion, Japanese internment, and violence wherein Asian Americans are largely not considered people of color and exempt from discrimination within and towards the community. Isabel, age twenty-four and Chinese adoptee, has recently begun to question the conditions of her adoption, her relation to her second family, and herself as an adoptee—what is often referred in adoptee spaces as a journey of adoptee reclamation. Conflicted by the racial paradigm she confronts today, Isabel remarks, "There's actually fear for myself of identifying as a person of color—that I'll cause contention or maybe that will appear to be dismissive to somebody else who identifies as a person of color but doesn't see me as one."[234] In the present "post-racial" moment, Isabel's fears reveal how the model minority discourse incites the disappearance of race and racial history for Asian Americans.

This chapter discusses how transnationally adopted Asian women are figured through the model minority discourse as a gendered process of racial sexualization. I begin by situating transnational adoption within gendered patterns of Asian immigration to the United States that underwrite the subjectivation of adopted Asian women. By engaging with the emergence of the sexual model minority discourse, I argue that adopted Asian women bring new considerations to this configuration because of their inculcation to whiteness in the private space of the white family that underline processes of racial sexualization through their intimate heterosexual encounters. Lastly, my discussion details how these processes demand adopted Asian women to mimic the nation's ideals, through the hyper-exceptionalized figure of the sexual model minority that entails the structure of racial melancholia.

[234] Isabel Martin, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 23, 2023.

Consumptive Labor and Gendered Patterns of Asian Migration

The gendered histories of war brides, mail-order brides, "comfort" women, and sex workers are entrenched in the legacy of military prostitution as well as the global asymmetries that demarcate the commodification of global South female bodies by and for global North androcentric consumption and pleasure.[235] Eng contends that Asian transnational adoption can be situated within the postwar pattern of gendered immigration as well as anti-Asian immigration histories during the nineteenth-century.[236] He writes:

> The period from 1882 to 1943 is often cited as the official years of Asian exclusion. However, the Page Law of 1875, largely banning female immigration from China to the United States, might be a more appropriate historical date to mark the gendered form in which racialized exclusion of Asian immigrants from the U.S. nation-state took place. In this regard, the privileged migration of Chinese baby girls today marks not only a striking reversal of this gendered history of racialized exclusion but also an emergent form of Asian American subjectivity, with considerable implications for Asian American studies, community, and politics. Indeed, it suggests how the transnational adoptee might be considered a proper subject of Asian America, while demanding an epistemological consideration of Asian American identity not reliant on an assumed (blood-line) kinship or a naturalized story of immigration, assimilation, and settlement.[237]

From the gendered history of the Page Law to the contemporary channel of Asian transnational adoption, conventional paradigms of labor exploitation can be reconsidered in tandem with evolving structures of gender subordination and racial domination.[238] The rapid industrialization of the United States, Eng explains, occasioned the production of "cheap and flexible labor" by creating the illegal Asian immigrant subject from the late nineteenth century to World War II.[239] As this figure was defined outside the rights and privileges of citizenship and exclusion laws, communities of these immigrants were isolated into ethnic

[235] David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (New York: Duke University Press, 2010), 105.
[236] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 107.
[237] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 107.
[238] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 107.
[239] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 107.

enclaves that curtailed their capacities to accumulate capital.[240] From this, the Asian American citizen of the postwar period animates transnational adoption as an expansive account of exploitation, not of wage labor, but towards consumer capitalism that effects a consumptive labor.[241] That is, schemes of flexible production and accumulation amidst the shift to global capitalism would organize a consumptive labor that "serves to produce and to organize social community as a supplement to capital."[242] In regard to the transnational adoptee as an Asian American immigrant, the exploitation of affective labor is effected by the consumption of the white heteronormative middle-class family that helps to consolidate ideals of family in the global North.[243] The transnational adoptee is subjectivized from a "third-world orphan to a privileged first-world citizen" where the discourse of U.S. exceptionalism and gendered economies of adoptable racialized children organize the nation-state's will to "select its own objects of desire and produce them as citizens" through the private realm.[244] Eng details that this form of affective exploitation is distinct from "women from the global South who have traditionally been exploited for their wage labor in the manufacturing sector, emotional labor and care work in the domestic sphere, and now reproductive labor as [first] mothers."[245] Here, we can consider how this consumptive labor organizes adopted Asian women across the private arena first in the white adoptive family that underwrites their intimate encounters throughout their lives.

[240] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 107.
[241] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 107.
[242] Miranda Joseph, *Against the Romance of Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 42 in Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 108.
[243] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 109.
[244] Siobhan Somerville, "Notes toward a Queer History of Naturalization," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 3 (2005): 662.
[245] Eng, 108-109.

Adopted Sexual Model Minorities

Robin Zheng suggests a double feminization of Asian women in the United States that fashions the "sexual model minority" as an "ideal in their union of sex appeal with family-centered values and a strong work ethic" circumscribed by white notions of femininity, family, and capitalist culture.[246] Upon sharing how my second parents told me they had to go to China to get smart children, Rachel recalls, "I feel like I've heard something similar because I was the only one who went to college—like they had to import me to get like the smart one. I do remember that sentiment of she's Korean, so that's why she's smart, that's why she gets all the good grades."[247] These processes of racial sexualization underline the discourse of the sexual model minority that occur in the private realm of family and kinship. By relying on notions of racial essentialism, they arrange adopted Asian women as "good daughters"—polite, smart, and dutiful. Their access to U.S. education, engendered by the approximation to white middle-class ideals of the adoptive family, functions as one conduit to perform a "good multicultural citizenship" by achieving of academic success circumscribed by whiteness. This process of racialization orients the adopted Asian women towards the white adoptive family through its middle-class values that demands taking on the sexual model minority stereotype insofar as being a good adopted daughter means to enact the "better life" that one has been given. Claire, adopted from Vietnam and age twenty-four, wore a red ethnic dress to her undergrad commencement ceremony and she recalled how her second mother received her decision:

> "How can you honor that woman?!"—She called me on the phone and she was really upset because I sent my graduation dress to our family group chat and she was on her walk… She was like, Yeah that dress—that's really insulting that you would attribute your college education to that woman—How dare you honor and pay tribute to that woman. And I told her I am not doing that for her. It's for

[246] Robin Zheng, "Why Yellow Fever Isn't Flattering: A Case Against Racial Fetishes," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2, 3 (2016): 405, doi:10.1017/apa.2016.25.
[247] Rachel Anderson, virtual interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, September 1, 2023.

> me. It's my culture, not my mother's culture necessarily. It's mine too. I'm doing this because— and I gave her my reasons even though I shouldn't have to justify that. And she was just—it's the most white savior thing ever—she was like, You know your father and I worked so hard so you could have a college education and you're just throwing it back in our face—this is so disrespectful that you would memorialize your birth mother this way. And she said some other really triggering stuff—she was like, I was the one that changed your diapers not her. I did everything she didn't. She didn't do anything for you… She said, You would never be caught dead, Claire, in something that made you look white—and I had to stop her there. I was like you know nothing I could wear or do to myself would ever change the fact that I'm Asian. It just doesn't work that way.[248]

Academic achievement, prescribed by sexual model minority trope for adopted Asian women, conjures tensions between the Asian mother and white mother that, in the account of Claire, reveal the underlying loyalties expected of transnational adoptees to maintain. Obtaining a college degree, a capitalist ideal of the U.S. higher education system towards upward mobility, helps to substantiate Claire's supposed indebtedness to her second mother whereby the graduation dress is signified as a disservice to the procured maternal relationship between white mother and Asian adoptee. The domestic labor of the white adoptive mother functions to persecute the threat of the Asian mother who "didn't do anything," thus demanding the affective labor of Claire to the "making good" of the white heteronormative nuclear family by attributing the middle-class ideal of obtaining a college education to her white mother.

Crucially, the dominant discourse of transnational adoption animates how the "third-world" woman—the first mother, is "ascribed agency precisely at the moment she 'freely' relinquishes her child into the global system or alternately 'chooses' to abandon her."[249] Because choice is integral to transnational adoption's morality tale that fashions Western narratives of self and nation, the accordance of agency to first mothers helps to erase the

[248] Claire Jones, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 22, 2023.
[249] Eng, 106.

exploitation of her reproductive labor as well as the global disparities of gendered commodification and exchange in transnational adoption as a system of stratified reproduction.[250] Thus, evidenced in Claire's narrative, is how the agency of her first mother is disavowed by her white adoptive mother— "I did everything she didn't"— by appealing to the moral good of white domesticity that mobilizes shame towards the Asian mother and the culpability of the adopted Asian daughter. Moreover, the ascription of agency to first mothers functions as an ephemeral crux of transnational adoption dominant discourse that privileges white, middle-class women's embrace of maternity. Consumed first by the white adoptive family, the consumptive labor of transnational adoptees guarantees the affective integrity of the white, heteronormative, middle-class family in the global North through its completion of warranted ideals.[251]

Racial Sexualization

In tandem with the prescription of academic success in the white adoptive family, the "sex appeal" of the sexual model minority figure mandates an excessive, hyper-feminized form of racialized sexuality. Isabel, age twenty-four and adopted from China, grew up in a small, rural and predominantly white town. When I asked her about her sexuality, she explained how it was mostly up in the air although she thought she might be a lesbian. Isabel went on to tell me how her experiences of being objectified and racially sexualized have led her to dislike her body. She recalled the first time of being sexualized:

> I was like in fourth grade, actually. It was this prayer get together at our house and there was a boy similar to my age there. And he went to public school and I was homeschooled or in private school so we didn't go to school together—but he really pressured me. He's like, All my friends have like girlfriends—all of my friends have already kissed somebody and I haven't. And he really pressured me into doing that—he brought up the fact that I was Asian and that it would really make him look a lot better. So I did—I kissed him. And that was actually

[250] Susan Coutin, Bill Maurer, and Barbara Yngvesson, ''In the Mirror: The Legitimation Work of Globalization,'' *Law and Social Inquiry* 27 (2002): 825.
[251] Eng, 109.

> the first kiss that I had and just the fact that it was for that reason—I felt pressured to do it—and just that act. I was literally in fourth grade, so that's like under 10 years old—I already was this sexualized object as a child and I don't know, I agreed to it because I felt like that's what I was supposed to do… He just wanted to be able to say to his friends that he kissed an Asian girl.[252]

Isabel describes what would become a familiar feeling of yielding to the pleasure of her intimate partners because of her Asianness. As Isabel got older, she would have multiple relationships where her white male partners told her they only dated her because she was Asian after they broke up with her. She continued to explain:

> [They would make] sexual remarks about my long hair—the things you can do with long hair like in the bedroom and stuff. And I think just like the porn industry kind of makes it worse. And I'm not even sure like where that originated. The stereotype that Asians are good at bed. I don't know where that comes from.[253]

Isabel points to the salience of racialized desire for Asian woman in dominant U.S. culture that is industrialized through pornography. While the historical accordance of excessive sexuality to Asian women can be evidenced in the Page Law (1875) that fortified exclusionary immigration on the premise of their "lewd and immoral purposes," legal scholar Sunny Woan marks the salience of racialized affinity for Asian and Asian American women through the women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s.[254] While several feminist organizations and movements took place in the United States, as well as other Western countries, liberal feminism dominated this period which particularly advocated for white, middle-class women's right to equality, economic independence, and elimination of discrimination based on sex. Thus, as white women were scrutinized as "radical and career-oriented," Woan explains Asian women quickly became celebrated as the antithesis to the visions of white

[252] Isabel Martin, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 23, 2023.
[253] Isabel Martin, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 23, 2023.
[254] Sunny Woan, "White Sexual Imperialism: A Theory of Asian Feminist Jurisprudence," *Wash. & Lee J. Civ. Rts. & Soc. Just.*14, 2 (2008) 294. See San Diego State University, "The Page Act of 1875."

liberated women.[255] Gendered race relations in the U.S. thus triangulate the hyper-femininization of Asian women through the figure of the insufficiently feminine or masculinized Black woman that functions to legitimate conventions of white femininity as an ideal.[256] Moreover, this configuration of Asian women articulates a racially sexualized exceptionalism that is established through the idealized whiteness.

In the dominant public sphere, the hyper-sexualization of Asian women oscillates between popular tropes of the "lotus blossom baby" or "duplicitous dragon lady" wherein both ostracize a fictive appeal of otherness. [257] The former describes an extreme prescription of patriarchal femininity—delicate, abstract, and utterly feminine sexual-romantic object—that is also often figured through archetypes of the China Doll, Geisha Girl, and shy Polynesian beauty.[258] Whereas the "duplicitous dragon lady" is rendered as mysterious, sexually alluring, and domineering, both constructions entail racialized notions of sexual deviance.[259] Claire detailed how she is often rendered closest to the prescription of the demure femininity (lotus blossom baby):

> I really detest the cute comment from men…I always get, "You're very cute, and you're very approachable. You're very innocent-looking." I really think it's still just as insidious, because they're like, "Oh, she's cute and innocent," and that's the sexy appeal… I think one of my guy friends said, "If I ever thought about you in a sexual context, I'd kill myself." He was like, "I just can't handle it. The idea of you having sex or doing anything sexual, that really puts me off."… I never get men who approach me like, Oh, I think you're really sexy. Can I have

[255] Cho, "Converging Stereotypes," 192.
[256] See Emily Takinami, "Feminized Asians and Masculinized Blacks: The Construction of Gendered Races in the United States," Thesis (University of Vermont, 2016).
[257] Julie Yuki Ralston, "Geishas, Gays and Grunts: What the Exploitation of Asian Pacific Women Reveals About Military Culture and the Legal Ban on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Service Members," *Law & Ineq.* 16 (1998): 686.
[258] Renee Tajima, "Lotus Blossoms Don't Bleed: Images of Asian Women" in *Making Waves: An Anthology By and About Asian American Women* (Beacon Press, 1989), 309.
[259] "[S]mall, weak, submissive and erotically alluring…eyes almond-shaped for mystery, black for suffering, wide-spaced for innocence, high cheekbones swelling like bruises, cherry lips…When you get home from another hard day on the planet, she comes into existence, removes your clothes, bathes you and walks naked on your back to relax you…She's fun you see, and so uncomplicated. She doesn't go to assertiveness-training classes, insist on being treated like a person, fret about career moves, wield her orgasm as a non-negotiable demand… She's there when you need shore leave from those angry feminist seas. She's a handy victim of love or a symbol of the rape of third world nations, a real trouper." See Tony Rivers, "Oriental Girls," in *Gentleman's Quarterly* (1990) that depict Asian women as the "great Western male fantasy."

> your number?" They're always just like, "Oh, that's really sweet. I like how you're smiling. I like how you're nervous—I've had men at the bar be like "I like how you're really shy with me right now. That's really cute and I will pursue harder."[260]

Evidenced by Claire is how the hyper-passive configuration of Asian female sexuality is rendered irreconcilable with the male imagination to the extent of self-annihilation—"If I ever thought about you in a sexual context, I'd kill myself." The threat to expend oneself, rather than the prospect of eliminating Claire, is underwritten by the Western political imaginary's apprehension of self-annihilation as the ultimate abnegation of power that corroborates the pathologized racialized feminine subject. In this sense, the rhetoric of racialized misogyny is mobilized through the male subject's self-eradication that subscribes to the value of individual life in the figure of the demure Asian woman the moment she is imagined to do "anything sexual." Fashioned by demand of racialized purity, the figure of the chaste Asian woman is contrived through the absence of sexual agency within the moralizing discourse of heteropatriarchal sex.

On a different account, Claire continued to share how this construction of the demure Asian woman was sustained by, yet titillating for her racialized male partners:

> I have had Asian guys before be like, "Oh, you have a good type Asian pussy." And I'm like, You bought into that narrative as an Asian guy? You're crazy for that.

She later asked me:

> Didn't you have someone who asked if your vagina is sideways?
>
> *No, they asked me if it was tighter because I'm Asian.*
>
> I am so sorry—oh god, yeah—vagina comments I do get. It was my second partner who was Persian-Pakistani. I made the mistake of being like, He's a person of color. We're not going to run into racist issues here. But, I mean, we did run into a lot of it. There was one time we were being a little more intimate

[260] Claire Jones, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 22, 2023.

> and he took my underwear off and I was getting a little hesitant. He was like, Your vagina is perfect—it's an innie. I was like, What? A what? He was like, Yeah—you know, some vaginas are outies.[261]

Claire's question gestures towards a dominant trope which posits the vulva is positioned horizontally where the opening of the vaginal canal would close as the legs are separated implying that Asian women become "tighter" during penetrative sex—a heteropatriarchal ideal that naturalizes the sexual utility of Asian women. Similarly, Claire's Asian male partner depicts an idealization of her "innie" vagina that refers to the labia majora as small, symmetrical, and neatly tucked which functions as an indicator of sexual intercourse assumed to be penetrative under heteronormative structures of sexuality. Thus, an "outie" refers to the putative elongation of the labia majora that constructs female sexuality as perverse. In this narrative, Asian female sexuality is marked on the body at the site of Claire's vulva that essentializes the notion of racialized sexual purity through her Asian male partner's identification with white ideals of heteropatriarchal desire in dominant culture. Moreover, the sexual model minority discourse entails a dichotomy of Asian femininity through split images of agency—drag lady as sexually agentive and lotus blossom as sexually passive—that demands the absence of Claire's agency for her male friend whose racial anxieties are directed inwards and marks her vulva as a naturalized bodily sign of race.

Mimicry

> One of my fears with dating a white guy and then telling him I'm adopted—I feel like they might see it as this—they might see it as they get the "benefits" of an Asian woman. So someone who's phenotypically Asian, whatever weird attraction they have from physicality, but they don't have to go through the cultural barrier in the sense that if they meet my parents, they're not going to struggle. They're fucking white too! That makes me worried all the time that that might even increase their attraction because they're like, Oh, I don't even

[261] Claire Jones, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, July 22, 2023.

> have to fight about this. She's a white girl in an Asian woman's body! Perfect! I dislike that a lot.[262]

Claire explains her anxieties of being desired by white men who might recognize her as "perfect" figure of a "white girl in an Asian woman's body" premised on her intimate subjectivation through whiteness. The task of disclosing her adoption to a white male partner elucidates how her Asianness is a sexual secret insofar as it determines whether her transracial union is culturally sanctioned or renounced. That is, the fear that her adoptedness racializes her as a hyper-exceptionalized figure of the sexual model minority discourse accorded with an interiorized whiteness against her Asian body. Claire's worries concern being reinscribed into the discourse of multiculturalism where the rhetoric of choice, as object choice, works in tandem with the colorblind politics of the private realm. Here, we see the consolidation of white heteronormative ideals of intimacy through a dialectic of visibility and invisibility. That is, her interiorized whiteness, a sanctioned ideal of her placement in the white adoptive family, and racialized body suggests she is precisely Asian American without blood-line kinship or a naturalized form of immigration.

Intimately approximated to the nation's ideals through the private realm, the adoptee as an Asian American subject is achieved through the consumptive labor in white middle-class heteronormative family that is further mobilized by Claire's potential white male partner. While the model minority stereotype largely constructs Asian Americans in terms of material success, this configuration is partial because it is primarily concerned with economic achievement rather than social or cultural belonging, hence preserving the idea they are eccentric to the nation.[263] Gleaned from Claire's narrative is how transnational adoption produces an Asian American subject who gains cultural legitimation through the position of

[262] Claire Jones, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, September 2, 2023.
[263] Eng, *Racial Melancholia*, 45, 37.

the adopted sexual model minority—a white girl in an Asian woman's body. Here, the social fabric of multicultural belonging is contrived through white ideals of heteropatriarchal desire that underwrite the premise of a white male partner's piqued interest that go on to effect the absorption of racial difference. Through this form of gendered immigration and consumptive labor, adopted Asian women as sexual model minorities sanction a specific model of recognition in the intimate realm that questions normative meanings of Asian American through this multiculturalist fantasy of the adopted Asian woman.

Claire's account reveals how the hyper-exceptionalized figure of the adopted sexual model minority renders her visible through the invisible where the Asian body dissipates into an interiorized meaning of whiteness. Asianness, not as an inherent property of the body, but rather the social and historical horizons against which this visibility is achieved fades the moment it is saturated by whiteness—the simultaneous acknowledgement and disavowal of difference. Eng writes:

> Unlike previous historical incarnations of passing that demand the concealment of racial (or sexual) difference… here we witness not the suppression of difference, but the collective refusal to see difference in the face of it. In this regard, transnational adoption helps to mark the resurgence of an abstract individualism meant to shore up neoliberal claims to colorblindness in our multicultural and post-identity age.[264]

The abstract individualism of transnational adoption refers not just to the white adoptive family but as well as other intimate relations, for Claire with a white male partner. The dismissal of her visible Asianness is contrived through the colorblind logic that prescribes an interiorized whiteness to re-consolidate the naturalized heterosexual union of the Asian woman and white man against the historical terrain of Asian exclusionary female immigration.

[264] Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship*, 97.

Today, Asian female sexuality is no longer defined outside the boundaries of legal marriage as it was from the first anti-miscegenation law in 1861 of Nevada until the 1967 Loving versus Virginia Supreme Court case.[265] Instead, the Asian woman and white man dyad is an idealized vision of racial progress and race mixing, as the best of both worlds—whiteness and Asianness, as well as a racial exceptionalized heteropatriarchal union. This new logic of passing coupled with the sexual model minority marks adopted Asian women as "whiter than white"—an absorption of racial difference. Here, the sanctioned ideal of whiteness effects the consumptive labor of the transnational adoptee by her white adoptive parents that foregrounds the reinstatement of whiteness through her consumption by Claire's prospective white male partner. Through this, adopted Asian women are demanded to perform this specific racial and sexual monolith that recognizes them in the intimate realm by the limits prescribed by dominant culture.

In Homi Bhabha's essay, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Colonial Discourse of Ambivalence," he contests that the colonial regime orchestrates the coercion of colonized subjects to mimic Western ideals of whiteness that are nevertheless condemned to an inexorable failure. Bhabha explains:

> Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually reproduce its slippage, its excess, its difference… *Almost the same but not white*.[266]

The ambivalence of colonial discourse, a result of the doubling of difference that is nearly the same but never quite enough, marks a social imperative of inevitable failure since

[265] Deenesh Sohani, "Unsuitable Suitors: Anti-Miscegenation Laws, Naturalization Laws, and the Construction of Asian Identities," *Law & Society Review* 41, 3 (2007): 587.
[266] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 126, 130.

"mimicry emerges as the representation of difference that is itself a process of disavowal."[267] Eng brings Bhabha's discussions of colonial mimicry together with U.S. domestic race relations, as a postcolonial nation, through the function of the racial stereotype for Asian Americans as model minorities. Insofar as "the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency," Eng argues that mimicry operates as a specific practice in racial melancholia because the task of gaining recognition in dominant culture mandates Asian Americans to mimic the figure of the model minority that is a simultaneous process of estrangement from the nation's norms and Asian American histories.[268] If we accept the sexual model minority, for the adopted Asian American woman, as a comparatively privileged stereotype from which their recognition emerges then mimicry functions as a racial and sexual process that distances adoptees from mainstream ideals and their own histories. That is, the piqued interest in Claire as a white a girl in an Asian woman's body marks a coming together of the sexual model minority discourse and neoliberal multiculturalism that renders her intelligible through a distancing from ideals of the nation where mimicry functions as a melancholic process.[269] The built-in failure of mimicry is always both; "a partial success and a partial failure to assimilate into the regime of whiteness," that declares Claire as whiter than white—an excess of racial difference:[270]

> I never had the chance to date any Asian men or women, so they were all white—but also that was during the time when I also thought of myself as white so I didn't really think much about it… In the back of my mind, I always thought they're dating me because I'm Asian and they have certain expectations for me… That's the problem in all my relationships. I've just thought of myself as like my duty here is to please my partner—as an Asian woman.[271]

At the same time, Isabel also recognizes herself as white:

[267] Bhabha, "Of Mimicry," 126.
[268] Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 66; Eng, *Racial Melancholia*, 45.
[269] See Eng, *Racial Melancholia*, 45.
[270] Eng, *Racial Melancholia*, 45.
[271] Isabel Martin, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 23, 2023.

> I am white and I'm in a relationship with a white person. I think it was always surface level, though, because like somewhere deep, deep down, I would be like—I'm still Asian though. And there would always be that little gut nagging of, What do other people think about this? And what do you look like? What does your partner see in you? Is it just the fact that you're Asian? I think there's a bit of white saviorism with adopting. I think society also puts a spin on it with a white person choosing to date like a person of color, because to society, that's like look at you being progressive.[272]

Processes of racialization, already sexualized, and occur through object choice and identification that locate Isabel, Chinese adoptee aged twenty-five, between ideals of whiteness and Asianness. Although Isabel thinks of herself as white, she also orients herself towards ideals of Asianness in relation to her white, male partners. Crucially, the identification with whiteness and apprehension of her Asian body are not necessarily discordant but force her to see herself outside of herself unsure if she is desired because she is Asian or in spite of it. Here, the sexual model minority discourse, organized through discourses of Asian transnational adoption and transracial sexual-romantic intimacy, demands Isabel to mimic this stereotype, that to an extent she has identified with. First applauded as salvaged children who effectuate the doctrine of U.S. exceptionalism through the white middle-class heteronormative family, the continual exploitation of racial and sexual consumptive labor produces and disavows a prescribed excess of difference indexed by the tenants of neoliberal multiculturalism—a racial politics where race only ever appears as disappearing. Marked through the visible, difference is hyper-extracted to mark her as a keepsake of the nation-state through a multicultural fantasy of the global family and heteropatriarchal union that dictates a potent narrative of racial progress.

Conclusion

[272] Isabel Martin, interview conducted by Lily Stewart in Louisville, Kentucky, August 23, 2023.

This chapter has examined the specific Asian American subjectivity of transnationally adopted women across spaces of intimate relations. Processes of racialization, immigration, and assimilation contrive the gendered hyper-exceptionalization of adopted Asian women through the sexual model minority discourse that uphold regnant ideologies of multiculturalism and colorblindness under the contemporary mandates of contemporary neoliberalism. The popular desire to adopt Asian girls and consume Asian women through heterosexual encounters of pleasure and intimacy marks the historical conditions that make transnational adoption a gendered pattern of immigration that constitute the racial and sexual consumptive labor of adopted Asian woman. Underlined by the nation's dominant ideals, multicultural fantasies surrounding these women evince how transnational adoption is a stratified reproductive technology of race—whiteness, as well as heteronormative, middle-class values—for families in the global North and are sometimes enacted by adoptees themselves as a plea for fragmented recognition throughout the intimate sphere.

Conclusion

Adoption derived from the Latin root *ad* and *optare* meaning "to" and "choose, wish, and desire" formulates into the Latin word *adoptare* understood as to take by choice.[273] The language of choice is perhaps of paramount importance in the domain of the intimate.[274] This research has placed adoption, as a transnational stratified system of reproduction, into a contemporary context of U.S.-led globalization. By centralizing the oral histories of transnationally adopted Asian women, I have discussed what transnational adoption *does*—as a form of immigration, a structure of kinship and family, and as an interpellative process—for Asian baby girls who today are Asian women in the current moment of neoliberal multiculturalism that stratifies difference through prescriptions of racial and sexual exceptionalism. I have attempted to explore how this form of immigration shifts, questions, and offers new considerations to Asian American women subjectivity. Crucially, this work is grounded in a politics of loss for adopted Asian women who seemingly appear as utterly desirable citizen-subjects within U.S. dominant culture.

It is indelible that I am intimately embedded in the inquires and considerations that this thesis has sought to address that return to comparative race scholars' inquiry to Asian Americans: *How does it feel to be a solution?*[275] Considering the emotional registers of race through racial melancholia that veer away from a racial "true" self, this work has underlined the affective dimensions of racism and racialization that animate the gaps between *being* Asian/American and *feeling* Asian/American for adopted Asian women that are interwoven

[273] "Etymology of Adoption," Online Etymology Dictionary, Published September 15, 2022, https://www.etymonline.com/word/adoption#:~:text=mid%2D14c.%2C%20adopcioun%2C,chose%20for%20oneself%2C%20take%20by.
[274] David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (New York: Duke University Press, 2010), 9.
[275] See Vijay Prashad, *Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

with prescriptions of gendered sexuality.[276] As a de-pathologized structure of feeling, racial melancholia underscores these social dynamics of race, gender, sexuality, as well as class, that I have outlined across realms of the intimate where *feeling* like a solution narrates a melancholic process. Detailing the ways adopted Asian women are desired, by their white adoptive families and intimate heterosexual partners, difference is contrived through registers of loss across gendered processes of immigration, assimilation, and racialization in the age of diversity management.

Transnationally adopted Asian women carry and move along ever-changing relations to their adoption histories, first and second families, and most importantly to themselves. Today, few of the narrators are in reunion, others have just embarked on searching for their first families, while some have estranged themselves from the second families they have been placed into. Doing oral history helps to uncover the relationship between individual women and the state, between racial ideals of gendered sexuality, and ambiguous notions of home. Since the steady decline of Asian transnational adoptions from 2004, those adopted in the last "wave" now enter early adulthood. Speaking on the 1980s AIDS crisis in New York City, Douglass Crimp reminds us:

> A certain melancholic disposition can also inform a useful political position. If mourning is achieved by severing attachments to the lost object and moving on, in melancholia there is a form of attachment to loss that can be politicizing. Maintaining an attachment to the lost object, the lost loved one… can be productive of an antimoralistic politics.[277]

In a time where race only appears as disappearing from the dominant public sphere, and not least the private domain of intimacy, racial melancholia for transnational adoptees animates

[276] David Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation: On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (New York: Duke University Press, 2019), 125-126.
[277] Tina Takemoto, "The Melancholia of AIDS: Interview with Douglas Crimp," *Art Journal* 62, 4 (2003): 89.

the everyday struggles of being racially marked in the white home and the white world so that we may not forget the personal and collective histories we have been severed from.

Appendix A: Oral History Guide

Session I

Personal Adoption History

1. Can you tell me what you know about your adoption?
2. Do you know why your parents wanted to adopt?
3. How did you come to the U.S.?

Adoptive Family

1. How was your adoption talked about growing up? [Discourse]

Relation to Adoption

1. What does it mean to be adopted?
2. How does it feel to be adopted?

Session II

1. Can you tell me about how you identify in terms of race, gender, and sexuality?
2. How would you describe your experiences as an Asian woman?
3. How did/does race impact your intimate relationships?
4. How do you think race influences the way you see yourself in these relationships?

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